Strategic Initiatives Interim Evaluation of Success Nova Scotia 2000

Final Report

Evaluation and Data Development
Strategic Policy
Human Resources Development Canada and
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Success Nova Scotia 2000, Interim Evaluation, is the second of three evaluation reports on Success Nova Scotia 2000. The first report, A Process Evaluation of Success Nova Scotia 2000 was completed in 1996. The third and final report, to be conducted in 1998-1999, will be a summative evaluation providing an assessment of the impact and cost-effectiveness of the Program.

This evaluation was conducted by Tom Tidey and Associates under the guidance of an evaluation committee established by the Nova Scotia Department of Education and Culture and HRDC.

Special thanks is extended to the participating employers, former NS Links students, post-secondary educators and administrators, Regional Working Groups (RWG) and Provincial Steering Committee Members, NS Links Project Officers, other Nova Scotia Department of Education and Culture and HRDC staff who shared their points of view with us either in person or over the telephone.

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Executive Summary

Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) and the Nova Scotia Department of Education and Culture have undertaken an interim evaluation of the Nova Scotia *NS Links (NS Links)* Program and the Training Culture Communication Strategy. The first report, A Process Evaluation of Success Nova Scotia 2000, was completed in 1996. The present report is a strategic examination and analysis of whether and how *NS Links* is achieving its key objectives, and how these objectives may best be realized. Through the communication strategy, recommendations about the further development of a climate for the development of a training culture will be incorporated. The final report, a summative evaluation of the initiative, is planned for 1998-99, and will assess the impact and cost-effectiveness of the program.

Objectives of NS Links

- To establish partnerships between educational institutions and the private sector which create structured pathways to the work world.
- To enable students to gain work experience relevant to their career goals.
- To assist the private sector to benefit from the information and new ideas that students bring through their participation in business and industry.
- To assist students in obtaining the necessary financial resources to continue their post-secondary education and reduce their student debts.
- To encourage self-sufficiency by defining the role of entrepreneurship and lifelong learning in career life planning thereby decreasing future dependency on the social safety net.

Scope of Report

The study has explored the key objectives of *NS Links*, and some of the critical aspects affecting its operation are listed below:

- wage subsidies as a vehicle to stimulate targeted employment and training
- the role, perspectives and behaviours of employers in providing labour market transition opportunities, and jobs for post-secondary students
- the effectiveness of the program design and delivery system
- the roles and influence of key informants and stakeholders

- the role of post-secondary educators and institutions in providing the information, skills and knowledge necessary for students' transition to the labour force and their response to labour market demands affecting youth

- employment situation of participants following *NS Links* placement experience

Evaluation Design

This evaluation is qualitative and formative in nature.

Data, relevant to the objectives of the program and on its operation, was collected by surveying 100 participating employers, 64 key informants and 150 former *NS Links* students. All were interviewed by telephone, except for the 64 key informants who were interviewed in person to obtain detailed information of their comprehensive knowledge of *NS Links*, its operation, policies, and procedures.

Department files were reviewed for comprehensiveness and completeness.

Available databases were used as information sources.

Numbers Involved

NS Links has served **2096** students since its inception and has had **1891** participating companies.

Key Findings

Wage Subsidy

The existence of a wage subsidy is seen by nearly 90% of employers as fundamental to their participation in *NS Links*. This subsidy not only encourages them to hire students but just as importantly enables them to devote financial and human resources for the students' training. Over 1/3 of the students believe that without the subsidy there would not have been a position available for them.

Employer support, for continuing their participation in *NS Links*, remains high at a 50% subsidy, but drops dramatically when faced with a scenario where the rate drops below 40%. Surveyed respondents and interviewees, indicated that a wage subsidy below 40% would result in a large exodus of employers from the program.

Other forms of subsidy, e.g., tax incentives, training vouchers, education vouchers, are supported by less than 50% of employers and are seen by respondents as requiring considerably more "selling" than a wage subsidy to employers in order to obtain their participation. Further, they would require as much or more administrative support and much more promotion. Nothing compares to a wage subsidy!

Training Modules

Key informants and employers viewed the training modules less favourably than the students with only 40% believing that they were beneficial to the students, while over 60% of the students viewed them as beneficial. Students especially liked the sessions on leadership, entrepreneurship and networking. Employers were troubled by the requirement to release the students from 3 days of their employment to attend training sessions, the content of which could or should have been covered in the colleges and universities, and which they believe had little or no relationship to the students jobs.

Employers indicated that their support could be enhanced if they were involved in the design and delivery of sessions which would be more workplace specific, and if invitations could be extended to other employees to attend as participants.

Bridges to Long Term Employment

NS Links is seen as achieving outstanding success in providing post-secondary students with career related work experience. Nearly 80% of employers indicated that most interns were ready for entry level employment in their career area at the conclusion of their placements. Many of those who were judged as not ready, required more education and/or training for their particular profession or trade. The proof of the employer viewpoint of outstanding success is supported by the fact that 84% of the students were working at the time they were interviewed and approximately half of them were working for their *NS Links* employer. Those working elsewhere indicated that the *NS Links* experience in their career area along with the opportunity to create and consolidate professional networks were invaluable to them in their job search. The 16% not working at the time the survey was conducted were evenly divided between those enrolled in further education or in other ways not available for work and those actively seeking employment.

Employer Satisfaction

Ninety-one percent of employers indicated that they were either very satisfied or satisfied with their *NS Links* students. Seventy-six percent of these employers intend to re-apply in the future and 3 of 4 of those who do not intend to re-apply said that it was due to a lack of financial resources on their part or they did not have a need for student interns.

Starting Salaries

Over 50% of former university students and approximately 25% of former college students are earning over $30,000 in their post *NS Links* jobs.

Partnerships

NS Links has been challenged in broadening the established working partnerships, between educational institutions and the private sector, which lead to structured pathways to the world of work. Post-secondary educators are generally seen as having only a limited commitment to the work force transitions of their students and to not be playing a significant role in *NS Links*.

It was suggested that each post-secondary institution should establish a central location where their services for career and employment information, counselling, cooperative education, *NS Links* and job placements would be coordinated and administered. The requirement for an educational "sign off" on each *NS Links* job description prior to the approval of employer applications would not only benefit the student who obtains the placement but would draw more educators into an association with *NS Links*.

Communications

NS Links needs to be more aggressively marketed and promoted. Its success is known to those directly involved, but not sufficiently celebrated with other possible employers, participants and the general public.

Internal communications with the regions are seen as requiring strengthening to keep staff better informed regarding contemplated and actual changes to *NS Links*. Regions would like the opportunity to provide input into the discussion and formulation of changes to the program or procedures.

Attracting Employers

Personal contact with employers by students introducing the *NS Links* concept, along with newspaper advertisements were the principle ways that *NS Links* employers became aware of the program. Employer information packages, to be used by students approaching prospective employers, and supported by newspaper advertisements is viewed as the best way to recruit new employers.

Getting Your Links Job

One third of *NS Links* participants surveyed knew someone in the company where they were hired and over 80% of these participants believed that this contact was helpful in their hiring. In total, 81% of all participants were required to be interviewed competitively before they were offered their job.

Employer Commitment to Lifelong Learning

Ninety-five percent of employers indicated that their organization supported the concept of lifelong learning in the workplace. They emphasized that they had a major responsibility for the upgrading, training and retraining of their employees and further that employees themselves had to share this responsibility with them. *NS Links* students had virtually the same views as the employers.

Provincial Steering Committee

The Provincial Steering Committee filled a significant role in the early stages of *NS Links*. This role is no longer necessary and should either be changed to reflect the current maturity and needs of *NS Links* or the committee should be disbanded.

Regional Working Groups (RWGS)

RWGs are crucial to the success of *NS Links*. Their role should be expanded and strengthened to make them more locally responsible and accountable.

Harmonization of Program

NS Links and cooperative education are sometimes viewed as competing and "either/or", rather than as complementary career oriented training programs. There is strong support among key informants and employers to harmonize *NS Links* and cooperative education to the greatest degree possible.

Continuum of Service

There is a recognized need for a continuum of services, including pre-employment assistance, post program placement support, and to connect *NS Links* to existing labour market information and related employment systems, sites and services.

Recommendations

1. Wage Subsidy

It is recommended that the wage subsidy be re-established at 50%, and that the impact of changing the subsidy level on small employer participation in the program in 1998-99 be monitored.

Further to the recommendation that the wage subsidy level be re-established at 50%, a review of the impact of changing the subsidy level to the current 40% on small business participation in the program, should be monitored.

Employer participation in *NS Links* is founded on the availability of the subsidy. Most employers indicated that in order to participate in *NS Links*, the wage subsidy was most important and that a 50% subsidy was considered essential.

Possible alternatives to wage subsidy were not nearly as well received as the subsidy. Some employers indicated that a tax incentive could be considered as an alternative to the subsidy, however it was not supported by many employers and by very few small employers.

Employers felt that the subsidy is balanced by their contribution to the extensive learning and training opportunities that are offered to *NS Links* participants and they are contributing significantly to the development of a learning culture within the employment community. This fact was strongly supported by the former *NS Links* students. They often expressed their appreciation to their *NS Links* employers for contributing so generously of their time and resources to their workplace learning and eventual success in the workplace in their chosen career area. Students and employers both commented that the high commitment to training would be very difficult to maintain without the subsidy.

The literature and program outcomes in other jurisdictions support the overall use of a wage subsidy as an effective means of targeting employment and training opportunities for specific populations in the labour market. There is evidence that post-secondary students are challenged in obtaining permanent, full-time employment upon graduation. Recent Statistics Canada data (March 1998) illustrate that employment for graduates is the norm — 80% of college and university graduates found work two years after graduation. But, many more than in the past had only part-time jobs.

2. Communication

a) It is recommended that communications needs as they impact on staff, employers and other stakeholders be further addressed.

Staff

Information about the program and changes within it are not well communicated and sometimes problematic. Staff reported that at times they feel isolated about the communication processes at the department.

Employers

Employers appear to have much savvy when it comes to locating subsidy programs. Many of the program participants indicated that they learned about the program from the employers. Employers indicated that the program changes, such as request for payment forms, termination documentation and deadlines were made for the benefit of the department which is probably not the intention of the department. This perspective might be addressed by using a different communication approach.

Students

The level of awareness amongst surveyed students that they were *NS Links* students, and of the objectives of the program; appears to be very low and leads to the conclusion that the penetration level is low.

b) It is recommended that student self-marketing be expanded and facilitated through creating and distributing marketing materials designed for this purpose.

Student self-marketing is amongst the most effective promotional methods, and is preferred by many employers. It also expands program capacity by attracting employers who otherwise may have been unaware of or unwilling to participate in *NS Links*. Further, student self-marketing is a promotion of self-sufficiency that deserves recognition and support.

c) It is recommended that NS Links results be more widely publicized.

Contrary to the recently released study by Statistics Canada and Human Resources Development Canada of 1995 labour data *High School May Not be Enough, NS Links* students claimed to have found employment because of the training they had and because of their work experience and not through relatives and friends. Awareness around these issues serves as motivators for students who may not have personal professional connections which was the case for most of the surveyed *NS Links* students.

It is suggested that *NS Links* produce short video clips of participants to help promote and expand the program. Students could tell of their work and of the work opportunities in certain areas.

Employment survey results after six, twelve and twenty-four months following completion of studies should be collected and then publicized. Information such as this will cause students, parents and post-secondary institutions to reassess the job preparation offered their students. Former *NS Links* students cited labour market demands as a strong motivator for choosing certain areas of studies. Students from certain programs have little work opportunity and are assuming large financial obligations. Respecting their right to choose, awareness and knowledge may serve to cause them to reconsider their choices. Students indicated on many occasions that they had little knowledge and very few opportunities to really learn what jobs pay and what people really do in these jobs. Again this points to the need to enhance career education programs at all levels of the spectrum.

3. Eligibility Criteria

It is recommended that program eligibility criteria guidelines be amended.

Extending eligibility time for students in need who require a longer period of time to secure employment is needed by a limited number of graduates. Some students indicated that they believed they would have benefited from a longer work term and that this work experience would make them more employable. Extending the program to provide an additional wage subsidy for a prescribed period to employers who retain graduating students, is worthy of consideration as a way to improve post-placement hiring.

Resources are needed in the form of mobility assistance for students who must travel significant distance to a placement. Students from remote areas or working in them, and others whose placement needs and opportunities lead them from home, would benefit from access to travel, accommodation and living costs assistance.

4. Cooperative Education

It is recommended that the Department of Education and Culture continue with its efforts to harmonize cooperative education programs with NS Links to the highest degree possible.

In order to reduce confusion and competition, these two programs need to be integrated, inclusive, and invisible as separate entities to both students and employers. Administrative separation remains feasible if it proves to be the most cost-effective manner of integrating them in the short-term.

Efforts to harmonize these two programs must engage funders at the two senior levels of government to rationalize cost-sharing and program delivery. Consultations within the Department will also be critical to a smooth integration of the two programs, perhaps as the initial step in integrating with other programs over a phase-in period of perhaps two to three years, starting in the 1999-2000 delivery year.

5. Partnerships

It is recommended that NS Links encourage the increased involvement of its various partners.

Most employers see an expanded role for post-secondary educators and institutions, which would enhance the educators' connections to the world of work. There should be greater engagement of the post-secondary educators in the workplace, facilitated by a redesigned *NS Links*. Suggestions include: the systematic involvement of educators in workplace visitations; furthering their involvement in the RWGs possibly through the implementation of an educational "sign off" on all employer applications; engaging their participation in the participant monitoring processes; and having the educators engage in workplace dialogues with employers, employer associations, curricula committees and students.

It is suggested that better use be made of private sector institutional partnerships, e.g., cooperative research projects focused on business issues.

The governing bodies, advisory boards, and senior committees of educational institutions should be encouraged to help address the challenge of workplace transitions, within the context of *NS Links* and the Training Culture Communications Strategy.

Employers must have a larger role in the program, other than merely as training and employment hosts. Expanding communication directly and through employer associations, Chambers of Commerce and Boards of Trade, is an effective best practice.

Employers recognize the importance and impact of lifelong learning. Most are willing to participate in training events, in addition to their own training role and some

exemplify having the kinds of relationships with post-secondary schools that are crucial to developing an appropriate response to the changing world of work. These role models need to be identified, celebrated, facilitated and replicated to the greatest extent possible.

6. Building Economic Capacity

It is recommended that the Department of Education and Culture devote resources to address, with the universities and colleges, the student capacity problem in engineering and technology.

It is becoming evident that one problem some emerging industries are facing is the small number of students available in certain areas of studies. It's not only a problem for Nova Scotia youth, but is one that will impact on economic growth in many regions. Additionally, these jobs are in the emerging growth sectors and the province may be in a unique situation, as Nova Scotia students have a definite preference to work in Nova Scotia, and if possible in their home community. Such a model is being developed by the CATA Alliance, an organization representing 450 high tech companies in Canada. Further exploration of this issue would possibly be of great benefit to Nova Scotia.

A number of the students commented that the recruiting companies that are on campus early and offer job confirmation early are attractive. "You get your job and you focus on finishing your degree". Given that a number of employers spoke of the shortage of potential engineering employees it might be appropriate for Nova Scotia companies to be encouraged to recruit early in the academic year.

7. Links Training Module

It is recommended that the 3-day NS Links training module be reviewed and that a needs analysis be undertaken.

The training modules are one of the more perplexing issues for those involved with *NS Links*. Most people interviewed appeared to be committed to lifelong learning and yet could see little relevance between the training modules and lifelong learning. Caution was expressed that the program should not be overly focused on training, as *NS Links* is an employment program for students in full-time attendance in post-secondary institutions where students are exposed to many of the same topics covered in some of the workshops. Employers see the application of the training modules as presently constituted and delivered, as another way in which their regular employees are disadvantaged in relation to student employees. Employers recognize the need for training and small businesses appear to feel that they cannot always afford to cover all the costs associated with the training. Further, employees must sometimes contribute their own time while employers cover the costs of the training, e.g., tuition. Fairness and loyalty are big issues for employees, and they are both real and perceived.

Given some of the issues raised by employers, program administrators might consider different scheduling alternatives such as evenings, weekends or possibly prior to or following the period of employment.

There does appear to be a dichotomy between the employers and students perception of the worth of the training modules. The majority of *NS Links* students viewed the training modules as beneficial especially the leadership and entrepreneurship sessions offered. A needs analysis involving all parties might address some of the respondents questions and allow for an increased level of satisfaction on the part of all involved.

8. *NS Links* as a Continuum of Services

It is recommended that NS Links be more closely integrated with available career services.

Students' career needs in the key areas of work experience and skill development are met in large measure by the *NS Links* program. However, better student awareness of, and access to a continuum of career services is needed. *NS Links* should be operated as part of a well understood and promoted continuum of career and educational related services, such as provided through existing federal, provincial and organizational infrastructures.

The *service loop* appears to remain incomplete for many participants, such as for liberal arts students who often have difficulty defining and arranging career-related internships and thereby benefiting from the program. The career service infrastructures through the Department of Education and Culture and HRDC are appropriate to help establish the processes for providing a continuum of services for *NS Links* participants and other eligible or about-to-be-eligible populations.

9. Employer Database

It is recommended that a database of employers be created to manage, promote, celebrate and facilitate placements and employer participation.

The restructuring of *NS Links* should continue to be electronically engineered to improve employer access to all student-based subsidy and work experience components and give students access to an approved employer list.

Employers

A database of employers is required to track participation, expand capacity for training and employment opportunities, and to promote and celebrate employers' participation.

Students

A clearing house approach, using existing career facilities e.g., Career Centres, HRCCs, should be undertaken to smooth access of employers and interns to one

another. Smaller employers may require additional recruitment assistance. The National Graduate Register may serve this purpose when it is fully operational.

10. Redesign of the Committee Structures

It is recommended that the RWGs and Provincial Steering Committee structures be reviewed to optimize stakeholder roles and maximize program effectiveness.

The **Provincial Steering Committee** has done the job for which it was intended and could now be disbanded or continue with a new or revised role.

The **Regional Working Groups** are an important and capable vehicle for ensuring coherent and effective decision-making, program redesign and delivery. Their make-up should be reviewed to increase employer representation and expand their role in marketing, promotion and evaluation.

RWG members should be offered training prior to assuming their responsibilities and given support material explaining their responsibilities and mandate and to assist them in carrying out their responsibilities.

11. Decentralization and Strengthening of Employer Selection and Recognition

It is recommended that the initial employer selection processes be reviewed and formalized by all Regional Working Groups. Applications should continue to be approved regionally to ensure program integrity. Approval letters should be sent provincially, with the regional contact as the signator. Local ownership and responsibility for the program should be strongly encouraged .

The contributions of the RWGs in employer approval has been critical to the program's success and the sense of local ownership. Each group, under the direction of the Department and HRDC, should review its decision-making process for employer approvals to ensure that the funding organizations are properly represented and that the selection decisions are subject to objective and defensible criteria, free of both the appearance and fact of conflict-of-interest. Time should be sufficient for individual RWG members to independently review each employer application. The RWG's role in selecting employers should be strengthened as necessary, to facilitate an efficient and effective use of community resources in program management and expand ownership of the program to its most prominent stakeholders.

Employers must assume a larger role in the program, other than merely as training and employment hosts. Creation of mechanisms to close the loop among the four major stakeholders, i.e., funders, students, employers and educators/institutions, will provide invaluable information for program re-design, curriculum adjustment, e.g., type of hardware or software used educationally and in the workplace, skill components needed, setting program standards, and in evaluating outcomes.

12. Not-for-Profit Organizations

It is recommended that career placements with not-for-profit organizations be reassessed.

Very few students, with their *NS Links* placement in such organizations, appear to have made a successful transition into full time employment. Students graduating in this area either move on to the "for profit" sector or have tenuous employment in the not-for-profit sector.

13. Post-secondary Career Counselling

It is recommended that post-secondary career counselling programs be improved and that continuous job support be available for the first two years after post-secondary enrollment.

Given that workers who make usage of employment insurance more than once within the first two years of their working lives tend to make much greater and more frequent demand on the social support system, an investment such as this, at this point in their working career might prove worthy of research. Possibilities of developing a role for *NS Links* alumni warrants exploring, given the high level of support for the program expressed by former *NS Links* participants.

14. Special Transition Programs

It is recommended that consideration be given to promoting and strengthening transition programs for specific populations.

Research indicates that some individuals in all fields, but especially General Arts, are experiencing difficulty in the transition to secure employment.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background to the Evaluation

This interim evaluation of the *Nova Scotia Links* and Training Culture Communication Strategy components of *Success Nova Scotia 2000 (SNS 2000)* is the second of three evaluation reports. The first report, *A Process Evaluation of Success Nova Scotia 2000*, was completed in November 1996. The third report, a summative evaluation of the initiative, will assess the impact and cost-effectiveness of the program and is planned for 1998-99.

This evaluation is a strategic examination and analysis of whether and how *SNS 2000* is achieving the key objectives of the Program and Communication Strategy, and how these objectives may best be realized.

1.2 Objectives of the Evaluation

The study was commissioned to identify directions for the program and strategies to take, rather than merely actions. Focus was also on identifying new, creative approaches to achieving the objectives, while ascertaining the extent to which the objectives were or remain relevant to the key stakeholders.

Consultation with these stakeholders was engineered to explore their views in all relevant aspects of the environment in which *NS Links* operates, most particularly their perceptions about student needs; governments' roles; how employers think and behave in employing students and others; and whether and how the program can or does achieve the best results.

The activities of the evaluation were shaped by the objectives of *NS Links* and The *Training Culture Communication Strategy*. These objectives are:

Nova Scotia Links

- To establish partnerships between educational institutions and the private sector which create pathways to the work world.
- To enable students to gain work experience relative to their career goals.
- To assist the private sector to benefit from the information and new ideas that students bring through their participation in business and industry.
- To assist students in obtaining the necessary financial resources to continue post-secondary education and reduce their student debts.

- To encourage self-sufficiency by defining the role of entrepreneurship and lifelong learning in career life planning thereby decreasing future dependency on the social safety net.

Training Culture Communication Strategy

- To establish partnerships between educational institutions and the private sector to foster a training and learning culture in Nova Scotia.

- To develop and deliver a communications campaign which will provide employers and students with information on the learning culture and its role in developing individual self-sufficiency.

- To develop and deliver a communication campaign which will provide Nova Scotians with information on the need for new and creative partnerships, such as internships, to assist Nova Scotians in the transition to the work world.

2. *Review Methodology*

2.1 Introduction

In addition to consulting with key informants, a formative study of *SNS 2000* necessarily comprises a review of the labour market and its often sweeping dynamics. Worker transition into the labour force is widely regarded as among governments' most pressing issues, and is consistently among the top three concerns of Canadians. Yet transition has many causative factors and effects, from economic conditions and shifts to youth demographics, local economic conditions, and employer behaviours and expectations. Consequently, there is a multitude of research avenues to pursue.

2.2 Background Information for Review

The study has explored the economic, social and operational aspects that drive *SNS 2000* and affect its optimal operation and impact. These are:

- the current labour market context, and its impact on the target population;
- the viability and use of wage subsidies as a vehicle to stimulate targeted employment and training;
- the attitudes, perspectives and behaviours of employers in hiring, training and participation in *SNS 2000* and other employment programs for post-secondary students;
- the effectiveness of the program design and delivery system;
- the roles and influence of key informants and stakeholders, including:
  - the role of post-secondary educators and institutions and their relationship with employers in helping students make the transition to the labour force;
  - alternative program design and delivery options.

This Interim Evaluation was conducted using a combination of academic research methods and interview survey instruments to answer the study's key questions about the program's impact on the overall objectives of *NS Links* and the Training Culture Communication Strategy components of *SNS 2000*.

2.2.1 Participant Employer Survey

Extensive telephone interviews-average of 30 minutes per interview-were conducted using a standardized list of 58 interview questions, approved in advance by the Department of Education and Culture and HRDC.

A stratified random sample was compiled with staff assistance, comprising 100 employers selected from the database of businesses throughout the province that participated in the *NS Links* program. They represented the industrial sectors as represented in the National Occupational Code and were selected in numbers proportionate to participation from the four designated regions of the province: Western, Northern, Cape Breton and Metro.

The distribution of counties within these regions is as follows:

Metro:	Halifax, Dartmouth
Cape Breton:	Cape Breton, Victoria, Richmond, Inverness
Northern:	Cumberland, Colchester, Pictou, Guysborough, Antigonish
Western:	Shelburne, Yarmouth, Digby, Hants, Kings, Annapolis, Queens, Lunenburg

Employers were examined about two key areas:

- their business practices and values in the areas of recruitment, training and use of employment programs;

- their connections with, and views/perspectives on, the impact and utility of *NS Links*, post-secondary educators and institutions, government-private sector partnerships, and funding issues (wage subsidies).

2.2.2 Key Informant Interviews

In-person interviews were held with 64 key informants representing 6 stakeholder groups:

- Participant Employers
- Post-secondary Educators and Administrators
- RWG Members
- Provincial Steering Committee Members
- *NS Links* Project Officers
- HRDC Officers

The interviews focused on the stakeholders' perspectives, views and experience with the program, partnerships, and their impact on the achievement of the program objectives.

2.2.3 Participant Student Survey

Direct input into the evaluation was obtained through telephone interviews of 30 to 40 minutes duration, with 150 former *NS Links* student participants.

A representative sample of *NS Links* student participants, who had indicated their graduation date as 1996 or 1997, were contacted. Care was taken to select a balance representation from the participant data base provided by departmental officials. *NS Links* participants from college, university and private school background representing numerous academic disciplines were included in the sample group.

3. *Key Informant Interviews*

3.1 Introduction and General Overview

This section summarizes the responses to the Key Informant Interviews and provides a point-in-time analysis of *NS Links* in early 1998.

Interviews were conducted with 64 Key Informants, representing 6 stakeholder groups. The stakeholder groups and the number interviewed in each follows:

- Participant Employers (21)
- Post-Secondary Educators and Administrators (10)
- RWG Members (13)
- Provincial Steering Committee Members (3)
- *NS Links* Project Officers (10)
- Human Resources Development Canada Officers (7)

Those interviewed were selected from lists provided by staff of the Nova Scotia Department of Education and Culture and Human Resources Development Canada, Nova Scotia Region. The data obtained through these interviews has been summarized both by the individual stakeholder group and in total for key questions under the heading, *Analysis and Observations*.

Key Informant interviews lasted from 45 minutes to 2 hours in duration. Most of those interviewed knew the program very well and had very definite opinions which they wanted to share. It should also be noted that they often wandered away from the specific questions and these other views are also included in the reported data, thus supporting the observation that the answer does not always relate directly to the question asked.

3.2 Key Findings

Links Objectives

It was generally acknowledged that there has been a satisfactory degree of success in achieving 3 of the 5 *NS Links* objectives. *NS Links* has not been successful in broadening the partnerships between educational institutions and the private sector, which create structured pathways to the work world. The objective to encourage self-sufficiency is not well understood by the Key Informants and its measurement is not possible.

Wage Subsidy and Possible Alternatives

The subsidy is viewed as a tremendous asset to employers and their business. It not only encourages employers to hire a *NS Links* participant, but also to direct their resources into the training of the participant. Employer support for continuing their participation in the program remains high with a 50% subsidy, but drops dramatically when they are faced

with a scenario where the rate falls below 40%. The effects of employer participation at the current rate of 40% should be examined closely.

There is no alternative to the subsidy that has the same strength and pulling power to employers. Vouchers, either training or education, are the best of the weaker alternatives.

Training Modules

Key informants generally viewed the training modules less favourably than the *NS Links* participants. There is a significant employer reluctance and resentment with respect to releasing the students for the 3 days. Greater employer involvement in the design and delivery of the training sessions along with the opportunity for other employees to attend would be welcomed by the employer community.

RWGS

RWGs are crucial to the success of *NS Links*. Their role should be strengthened and expanded to make them more locally responsible and to aid in a further decentralization of *NS Links*.

Provincial Steering Committee

The Provincial Steering Committee filled a valuable role in the early days of *NS Links*. This initial role for the committee has largely disappeared and has not been replaced by a new role. If a meaningful role cannot be determined for the Provincial Steering Committee, it should be disbanded.

Harmonization of Program

NS Links and cooperative education are sometimes viewed as competing and "either/or" programs, rather than as complementary career oriented training programs. There is broad key informant support to integrate and harmonize, to the greatest degree possible, these programs.

Continuum of Service

There is a recognized need for a continuum of service, including pre-employment assistance, *NS Links*, and post program placement support. Further, *NS Links* should be connected to existing labour market information and related employment systems, sites and services.

Partnerships

As previously indicated under "Objectives", *NS Links* has had little success in establishing working partnerships or in broadening existing ones between educational institutions and the private sector. Key informants would like educators to become much more involved with the workplace. A good start would be for post-secondary institutions to locate, in one central place, their service mechanisms for career and employment information, counselling, cooperative education, *NS Links* and job placements.

Post-secondary institutions and employers should be encouraged to work together jointly, on the design and implementation of business focused research. This working together on issues, important to business, would result in strengthened and continuing partnerships. In addition it would provide students and instructors with the opportunity to apply classroom theory to "real" business situations.

The requirement, for an educational "sign off" on each job description, prior to the approval of employer applications, would not only benefit the student, who obtains the placement, but would draw more educators into an association with *NS Links*. This association could then be further expanded.

Communication

There is a perception that *NS Links* is under marketed and little is done to promote or celebrate its successes. Outstanding employer contributions are generally not recognized.

Internal communication with the regions should be strengthened to keep staff better informed regarding program or procedural changes, both those under discussion and those approved. Input, regarding proposed changes should be solicited.

Bridge to Long Term Employment

NS Links is seen as having achieved outstanding success in providing post-secondary students with career related work experience. This experience is often followed by job offers from the *NS Links* employer at the end of the placement or upon graduation. For others, the experience and the network of contacts developed are invaluable when the eventual job search begins.

3.3 Analysis and Observations

Introduction

The analysis and observations are based on the 64 Key Informant Interviews and are grouped under the following headings:

- *NS Links* Objectives
- What *NS Links* Does Well
- What *NS Links* Does Not Do Well
- Issues for Students
- RWGs
- Provincial Steering Committee
- Wage Subsidy
- How to Maintain Employer Involvement without a Subsidy
- How to Increase Involvement of Post-secondary Institutions
- Action Taken on Process Evaluation
- Benefits of Placements to Students and Employers
- Training Modules

- Department of Education and Culture Role in the Transition Process
- Human Resources Development Canada Role

NS Links Objectives

It was generally acknowledged that there has been a satisfactory degree of success in achieving the NS Links objectives. Overall the objectives were regarded as suitable for the clientele.

1. Partnerships

To establish partnerships between educational institutions and the private sector which create structured pathways to the work world.

NS Links is viewed as the catalyst in the establishment of working partnerships between educational institutions and the private sector. However, there is limited evidence that there has been much success in this area. The partnerships that have been created are between students and their employers and between employers and the *NS Links* program. The development of the desired partnerships is difficult and would be greatly aided if provincial partnerships were first developed between the employer-sector associations and the post-secondary community. Regional and local partnerships would then more naturally follow. Building effective partnerships is not easy and must be done following a step-by-step process.

2. Work Experience

To enable students to gain work experience relevant to their career goals.

NS Links enables students to gain work experience relative to their career goals. It is the subsidy — and the maintenance of it at a sufficiently high enough level — that encourages employers to hire students and put them in career related jobs, rather than assigning them to tasks which are often routine, easily learned and don't relate to their career area. The subsidy increases the likelihood of enhanced work placements as it reduces the financial pressure for the student to be immediately productive and motivates employers to devote more time and resources to training and coaching.

Many informants, especially employers, talked about the significantly high number of students who were offered long-term employment at the end of their placement. Others mentioned that students were often able to network and obtain employment with customers, suppliers and competitors once having acquired the initial work experience — often supported by extensive training and job coaching by their *NS Links* employer.

Considerable input was received to either add to this objective or to establish a new objective, which would facilitate the transition from school to meaningful and appropriate long-term employment.

Concern was expressed for Humanities and General Arts students, who are often not able to find jobs that relate to their areas of study and their chosen career path. A special bridging program, involving training and work placement in related demand career areas, was suggested.

Placements would be greatly facilitated if all work experience type programs — regardless of funding source were reviewed, rationalized, revised, catalogued and linked administratively. A clearing house for all programs, administered centrally and accessible electronically by both employers and students, was cited by many as highly desirable. Closely related is the often expressed request to have a functioning data base that would help employers find student employees. A further strong request, especially voiced by small employers, was for assistance in employee recruitment and selection, especially in high demand sectors. Students and employers would appreciate assistance with the interview process.

Flexibility, in the term-length of career-related placements, would be beneficial especially in those placements where a relatively long period of training is required or the time required to complete a special project is longer than the term.

3. Private Sector Benefits

To assist the private sector to benefit from the information and new ideas that students bring through their participation in business and industry.

Employers were generally supportive of the objective for students to bring information and new ideas to the workplace. They acknowledged that often the student employees had *cutting edge skills*, particularly those that are computer related, and these skills were more advanced than those possessed by other employees. This was generally more true with small employers than with medium and large employers.

4. Financing Further Post-Secondary Education

To assist students in obtaining the necessary financial resources to continue their post-secondary education and reduce their student debts.

The program minimum wage requirement definitely helps students in financing future studies. Some employers registered concern with the required rate when it forced them to pay at a rate higher than that paid to their regular employees. Students who are only able to obtain career-related placements away from their home area may be disadvantaged, in that a substantial portion of their wages must be devoted to travel, room and board. This could possibly be alleviated by establishing mobility assistance.

5. Self Sufficiency, Entrepreneurship and Lifelong Learning

To encourage self-sufficiency by defining the role of entrepreneurship and lifelong learning in career life planning thereby decreasing future dependency on the social safety net.

This objective is viewed as confusing and not well understood, especially its relationship to the social safety net. The training modules and the time allotted (3 days) are seen to have little or no impact on this objective, with the paid time away from the job resented by a large number of employers.

6. Additional Objectives

Key informants, when discussing the *NS Links* Objectives, provided a number of suggestions that they felt should be integrated into the action plans of the existing objectives. The more common suggestions follow:

- provide employers and students with a comprehensive information kit;
- post-secondary institutions need to become more involved in the promotion of *NS Links* through training students to approach prospective employers;
- student job performance and individual placements should be reviewed and assessed at the end of each placement and;
- the employer base should be continually expanded and broadened to include industries and employers new to the province or to a region. *NS Links* is acknowledged as already opening the eyes of many to the employment diversity in Nova Scotia.

What NS Links Does Well

- *NS Links* is highly regarded by all stakeholders as a program that effectively meets the needs of students for career-related work experience and assists employers by providing quality workers for short periods of time.
- The wage subsidy component of the program has succeeded in engaging employers to provide training and employment opportunities for the target group.
- *NS Links* benefits post-secondary students by arranging for career-related work experience, which employers and other informants feel is beneficial to their post-internship employment opportunities.
- The income provided through employment provides obvious financial benefits to the participants. Some employers and other groups surveyed feel that the program helps inflate the wages of interns, relative to employment wages, especially in certain sectors. This may be viewed as a good or a bad thing, depending on your perspective.
- *NS Links* helps students connect with a network, often sectoral or industrial in nature. Among the student benefits most cited by employers was the networking opportunities working provides. The interns also serve as a source of potential staff for employers.

- Employers have a high regard overall for the quality of interns, seeing them as a pool for future employment opportunities in their companies.

- Employers are hiring interns in significant numbers, following their placement or upon graduation. Half of the Key Informant employers have had 5 or more interns since the program's inception (1994-95).

- Program administration is simple for employers.

- Program staff are well regarded by stakeholders, and are seen as helpful and for the most part appropriately involved during the internship.

- Participating employers appear to be enthusiastic and committed training partners.

- Participating students are seen by all respondent groups as benefiting in the development of *soft* skills — communication, problem-solving, working in teams, etc.

- Although there are few partnerships that appear to have been initiated since *NS Links* was started, there are good examples of relationships and partnerships between employers and post-secondary institutions that include partnered projects and serious involvement in institutional affairs, including curricula approval and review. Employers and educational institutions indicated that the climate may be appropriate to further develop this much needed area.

- Life long learning is embraced and witnessed by employers, although *NS Links* as a program, does not appear to impact significantly on life long learning in the workplace.

- Students are being offered an opportunity to apply classroom theory.

- The *NS Links* and Black Educators Association Project has been very successful in establishing designated internships, but less successful in the identification of eligible interns.

- *NS Links* is seen as an effective and appropriate program, capable of serving as a strong platform for further partnership initiatives, to assist youth and students (or other populations) to obtain training and jobs. Stakeholders are very supportive of most of the program's objectives and see *NS Links* as succeeding in achieving the parts of its mandate they identify with.

- The RWGs main area of contribution to the program is in the selection and approval of participating employers. Potentially, these groups could be much more involved.

What NS Links Does Not Do Well/Suggested Changes

It is important to note that criticism of the program can only be regarded as constructive, as many respondents were positive even in responding to specific questions about what *NS Links* does not do well. Specific areas for improvement or change cited by respondents follow.

- *NS Links* needs to be more flexible in its policies to facilitate placements, such as work terms and their duration, and eligibility requirements for graduates.

- Programs of the same nature need harmonization and rationalization, thereby establishing a seamless system to initiate placements and reduce program confusion and competition.

- Follow-up of both employers and students following placements is inadequate, and nearly non-existent. It should be a part of the role of *NS Links* staff, and perhaps could engage other partners as well.

- There is a recognized need to provide a continuum of services, including pre-employment assistance and post-program placement support, and to connect *NS Links* to available labour market information and related employment systems, sites and services.

- Wage subsidy rates have been driven downward, possibly to a point (40%) that may slow or retard program growth. Employers see the wage subsidy rate as appropriate at 50%, and do not embrace the notion of alternative programs, such as tax incentives, training and educational vouchers, as anything more than supplemental benefits, insufficient to replace a wage subsidy.

- Committee structures need further review to re-establish membership and participation, especially to adjust governmental vs. employer representation.

- The relationship between educators and their institutions and employers is not changed by *NS Links*. Most respondents, including employers, see an improvement from the past, but envision a much greater role for educators, which mostly involves their closer involvement in the workplace to adapt educational practices and improve currentness and relevance.

- Communication with *NS Links* staff and employers, regarding program start-up and criteria, should be improved. Staff should be among the first parties informed of new program developments, given the current complex landscape for employment initiatives.

- Employer and student capacity can and should be addressed through various forms of expansion. These include shifts in criteria, changes in the centralized approval system, improved technology, and policy changes to accommodate more participation.

- The information needs of the funders and other stakeholders should be reviewed and the process used for this review should engage stakeholders in determining the measures and indicators required.

- HRDC staff feel the need to connect more closely with their employer-partners, and increase their promotion of and linkages to *NS Links* and other labour market information and services.

- Cooperative Education and *NS Links* must be harmonized to the greatest degree possible.

- Employers identified the need for easier and better access to available interns, preferably through a database.

- Employers believe that the message of life long learning is not transmitted to the work place by *NS Links*. The training modules, with their message of life long learning, impact on the students and not on existing employees.

- Reasons for rejection of applications are often not clear to employers.

- Lack of consistency among RWGs with respect to processing criteria.

Issues for Students

Key informants were asked what they believe are the major issues for graduating students in light of the current social and economic environment. Following are the issues that were most commonly identified:

- Students realize that their prospects for long-term employment will be lessened if they have not had relevant career related experience and this is often very hard for them to obtain. They want work experience in their chosen field, the opportunity to prove themselves, and obtain long-term employment. *NS Links* provides them with this experience, which can be included in future resumes.

- *NS Links* students are generally seen as wanting to obtain long term employment in their home area, where they went for their post-secondary education or elsewhere in Nova Scotia, rather than relocating outside the province. However, there is a recognition that for some, there are no or very limited job opportunities in their career area in the local community, and in some cases in the province. They don't want to relocate but they reluctantly acknowledge that this may be necessary.

- For some, the accumulated debt from their years in post-secondary education is a major concern. They feel the pressure of obtaining employment to begin repaying loans while at the same time wanting sufficient money to purchase what they feel they have denied themselves while in school. They want the *good things in life* now, and feel that they have gone for too long without. This means that they are looking for employment that pays significantly more than minimum entry level wages.

- There is a concern by some that they will not be able to obtain a job different from the one they could have obtained when they graduated from high school. Their professors and instructors have told them that they will be the future leaders and they do not understand why they should start at the bottom in what could be perceived as a dull and mundane job. They want their future now.

RWGS

RWGs play an advisory role in marketing *NS Links* to the local business community, assisting in the selection and allocation of student work placements in the region, providing advice on policy issues related to *NS Links*, and in identifying, for the Provincial Steering Committee, those local issues and concerns which may impact on *NS Links* policy decisions.

Membership includes representatives from the employer community, educational institutions, students, community agencies, economic development organizations and other relevant government departments. A *NS Links* staff person is assigned to coordinate and facilitate the work of the group. Each group chooses its own chair from the employer members and the chair represents the region on the Provincial Steering Committee.

Thirteen RWG members were formally interviewed as Key Informants. Included in the interview were four question areas specific to their role as RWG members.

a) Members' Perception of Their Role

Typically, those members interviewed were approached by a *NS Links* staff member who requested that they become RWG members. Expectations were made clear and required them to attend three meetings per year, where they would screen employer applications for subsidized *NS Links* student placements. The *NS Links* staff person would be responsible for all the necessary paper work and organization prior to the 3 meetings and would through the Department of Education and Culture advise employers of the decisions made with respect to the applications.

Some RWGs are viewed as *rubber stamp committees*. The *NS Links* staff person conducts an initial review of applications and places them in categories with respect to the completeness and appropriateness of each application. The committee members first viewing of the applications is when they arrive at the meeting devoted to the screening for the next work term. They must then, with little time to review and reflect, make the determination to approve or reject. There is no subsequent opportunity for those applications that are not complete to be completed, then reviewed and assessed for the same term.

Employers and most other members generally represent only themselves, as their membership is the result of a direct personal request from the *NS Links* staff member. Very few are formally nominated by local or regional employer-industry-trade-sectoral associations, post-secondary associations/institutions, economic development organizations, community organization/associations, and government departments. It was a fairly strong feeling by the key informants that members should be nominated by groups or associations to serve on the RWGs. Consideration should be given to conducting workshops for RWG members and the development of orientation manuals.

b) Does the RWG Effectively Represent the Local Community?

Most interviewed believe that their RWG does represent the needs of the local community. However, as indicated in the section dealing with RWG member perceptions of their role, there is a need to have members represent more than themselves. It was suggested that there should be more employer and more, but to a lesser extent, post-secondary representatives on the RWGs. Conversely, there should be fewer members who are government employees though it was acknowledged that the Department of Education and Culture and HRDC should have representation.

c) Knowledge of *NS Links* Policy and Procedures Guidelines

Most members were not aware of the guidelines. Those that were aware felt that the guidelines were complete and useful. It was suggested that workshops focusing on policies and procedures would be especially useful for new RWG members and also for existing members.

d) Proposed Expanded Role of RWGs

The principal role of screening employer applications 3 times per year is viewed by many RWG members as the desired limit of their involvement.

However, changes in the role were suggested by a significant number of members. If implemented, these changes would enhance the quality of the placement for the students and contribute substantially to the decentralization of the administration of *NS Links*. The changes are:

- at the time each application is received it should be checked for completeness. Wherever additional information is required the employer should be contacted immediately and given the opportunity to provide the missing information;
- provide time for members to review employer applications on their own time, in advance of the meeting to screen applications;
- before final approval is given, placements must have an *education sign off*, which indicates that the placement will be relevant to post-secondary career goals;
- members to be invited to attend and interact with students and employers at training module sessions;
- RWGs to conduct joint conferences-meetings-functions for students and their employers;
- provision for meeting(s) during each term to respond to feedback from employers, students and *NS Links* staff;

- members to review employer and student reports at the end of the placement and make recommendation regarding future approval should the employer re-apply;

- mechanisms to reach out to the broader regional employer base.

Provincial Steering Committee

The Provincial Steering Committee was established to monitor the progress of *NS Links* in achieving its overall goals and objectives. The Provincial Steering Committee reviews and recommends changes to evaluation documents and program guidelines, policies and procedures. Further, it provides support and assistance to the RWGs, recommends criteria for the selection and distribution of *NS Links* internship placements, assists in the development of plans for the continuation of *NS Links* and assists in the development of the *Success Nova Scotia 2000* Communication Strategy.

Membership includes the Chair of each RWG, business leaders, senior representatives of post-secondary institutions and representatives of the *NS Links* funding authorities.

Three Provincial Steering Committee members were formally interviewed as Key Informants. One question in the interview dealt specifically with the Provincial Steering Committee and their role on the committee.

Members' Perception of Their Role and Involvement

The committee meets once or twice a year at the call of the Nova Scotia Department of Education and Culture. Members interviewed were generally not clear on the purpose of the meeting or their role on the committee. Very few employers attend the meeting, but there is a large contingent of government employees. *NS Links* officials manage the agenda and control all aspects of the meeting, which takes the form of a roundtable presentation by *NS Links* staff. There is little opportunity for meaningful input from committee members. A date or dates for subsequent meetings are not set and minutes are not later circulated to the members.

Members feel that their role needs to be clarified, more employers added to the committee and the number of government representatives reduced, regular meetings with a clear purpose scheduled, opportunity provided to submit agenda items, agenda sent out in advance of the meeting, updates provided on last meeting discussion items and minutes circulated following each meeting.

Wage Subsidy

Most employers not only see their own responsibilities in workplace training, but also feel the time and human resource investment demands placed upon them in their competitive situations. They see the government, through *NS Links*, as a funding partner, and they expect to pay their share, normally about 50% of the wage costs. Employer support for their active participation drops precipitously below 40% and is nearly negligible at a hypothetical 33% wage subsidy. Employers appear to relate strongly to the employment difficulties youth and students face, sometimes citing personal or family examples of

transitional problems. They emphasized that their time, cost and expertise are their contributions to the development of the future workforce and the wage subsidy is the public's contribution.

a) How to Maintain Employer Involvement Without a Subsidy

In spite of the question and the desired direction of the ensuing conversation, virtually all key informants chose to spend considerable time discussing the subsidy and providing compelling reasons for its retention.

The wage subsidy works and many question the need for it to be changed. Its strength and pulling power with respect to drawing employers into the program should not be underestimated. No alternative is close to the subsidy in its appeal to employers. Some alternatives are in themselves attractive, but not nearly to the degree of a wage subsidy and these alternatives also represent a dollar cost to government.

A further reducing or eliminating of the subsidy will not only dramatically reduce the work experience opportunities for students, but it will also reduce the quality of the placements due to the need for students to be more productive from the first day on the job. Employers indicated a high level of commitment to on-the-job training and the associated costs.

The subsidy is viewed by a number of employers as a tremendous asset in helping them respond to seasonal hiring needs and in some instances to their very survival. A number of small employers went on to say that because they had the subsidy and the student their business grew to the point where it not only survived, but they were able to offer continuing employment to the student after the placement.

Employers are very conditioned to the subsidy in this and in other post-secondary work experience programs, with the reduced wage costs being the critical participation issue for many of them. Any movement away from the subsidy to other alternatives will, in the eyes of many interviewed, not only be difficult to sell to employers, but will also cause them to no longer participate in the program and move to other subsidy programs.

b) Vouchers

Voucher, either training or education, were viewed positively by many of the informants. However, they were invariably seen as being complementary to the subsidy, rather than replacing it. There was continual reference to the bottom line and the need to have dollars to meet expenses, with wages being the most prominent expense. The connection between vouchers and the bottom line, though understood, was seen with skepticism and little favour when compared to a subsidy.

The training voucher is viewed as a viable possible alternative by a number of employers, especially those whose business is medium or large in size. It is believed that the voucher would impact on curriculum, which would then become more

workplace relevant and also stimulate the growth of the training industry in Nova Scotia. Small business, for the most part, indicated they could not participate without a subsidy. Training for them is often cost shared with the employee.

The education voucher is regarded as an interesting possibility, but again in a complementary fashion with the subsidy. With both the education and training vouchers, it was suggested that large employers would accept them, but would they hire as many students as they previously had with the subsidy? It was pointed out that vouchers or tax incentives will cost the government money and create their own bureaucracy, and in the long run may cost as much or more than maintaining the subsidy.

c) Advertising, Marketing and Promotion

Advertising and promotional materials do not impact on prospective new employers anywhere near as well as one-on-one personal contacts. It was strongly recommended that students, interested in work placements, be trained at their post-secondary institutions to approach prospective employers to solicit their participation in *NS Links*. Further, that these students be provided with a *NS Links* promotional kit, much of which could be left with the employer. The existing employers are seen as a very valuable asset and should be nurtured by *NS Links* staff to retain them in the program. Chambers of Commerce, sector and employer groups/ associations and professional organizations need to be targeted by *NS Links* officials at the provincial, regional and local levels to solicit their support and active involvement.

How to Increase the Involvement of Post-Secondary Institutions

a) Post-Secondary Institutions

Post-secondary institutions are seen as being only minimally involved in the *NS Links* program. Their greatest involvement occurs with cooperative education students whose placement is coordinated and monitored by a post-secondary staff member. *NS Links* students, who are not involved in cooperative education, are viewed as having obtained their placement with little or no educator assistance and their work term is monitored exclusively by *NS Links* staff. Post-secondary involvement, other than the cooperative education involvement, consists of posting notices regarding *NS Links* and job vacancies, and making pamphlets available to students.

b) Integrate *NS Links* into Existing Mechanisms

There are mechanisms already in place in most post-secondary institutions for career and employment information and counselling; cooperative education; and *NS Links*. Since funding for cooperative education and *NS Links* comes from government, Key Informants believe that through combining these mechanisms at each institution, all elements will benefit and employers will have one central office to contact regarding job placement opportunities. All liaison for work experience programs would then be through a common entry point.

c) Cooperative Research

Post-secondary institutions and business should be encouraged to co-develop research project proposals that involve both parties in the design and implementation of research, focused on business issues. Through the implementation of the projects it is believed that educators would naturally start to make curriculum based more on the realities and problems of the workplace and less on long-standing traditional theories. Unfortunately, some employers also cited examples where any collaborative work was denied.

d) *NS Links* Monitoring

Post-secondary educators need to become involved in the monitoring of students in their *NS Links* placements. This involvement could be in the form of actual site visitations, review of monitoring reports by *NS Links* staff and an interview with each student when the student returns to the institution at the end of the placement. Since this would require added staff time the institutions might require a financial incentive to obtain their involvement.

e) Culture Change

Post-secondary institutions traditionally view their role as academic and in isolation from the needs of the workplace. Changes away from this traditional position occur in some institutions and then usually only in a limited number of departments. If the desire is to increase the involvement of these institutions in the transition of students to the workplace, approaches must be with senior officials. It should be noted that the governing bodies in most institutions have senior business representation and they could be approached separately with any initiative in this area. Post-secondary boards and officials must be apprised of the problem/situation, consulted, given the opportunity to determine how they can help and then be provided with the necessary assistance and guidance to turn their intentions into reality.

f) Education Screening of *NS Links* Job Applications

An education *sign off* should be considered for each job description prior to the approval of the application by the individual RWGs. This *sign off* would indicate that the job does have a quality career application and that the desired applicant qualifications relate to the job description and are appropriate.

g) Career Counselling

Career counselling, closely tied to program selection, should begin in first year for all students in each post-secondary institution. This counselling would continue throughout the students' years in the institution and culminate with assistance, where necessary, in the transition to the workplace upon graduation. This counselling would be an added expense for the post-secondary institutions and would require a financial incentive to encourage implementation.

Action Taken on Process Evaluation

When surveyed, key informants showed a level of surprise with some of the recommendations and often indicated their disagreement with certain recommendations; especially around the issue of cooperative education student participation in *NS Links*. The employer community appreciates the cooperative education programs and the fact that students are available during different school semesters and not just over the summer. Further, many of the students in cooperative education are in professional programs that require related work experiences to ensure continuing enrollment in the program. Sectoral groupings, where employers are experiencing difficulties finding students to hire for full-time employment, need assistance in obtaining students for work terms.

Some public sector employees, who were interviewed as key informants, were concerned that with some programs students do not have equal access. Given the recent development in the winter of 1998, it appears that the Department of Education and Culture has decided to serve all students, regardless of their program choice, thus indicating that all students will have equal access to government sponsored programs. Additionally there are issues around tuition being charged by the post-secondary institutions for a summer job obtained through another government's subsidized program.

a) Improve the Marketing of the Program

Most key informants felt that much could be done to improve the marketing activities around *NS Links*. There is a perception that the program is under marketed and little is done to promote or celebrate its successes.

Outstanding employer contributions go unrecognized. The marketing materials in print are judged to be dull and very *government like*. The consensus certainly supports a vastly different approach, possibly delivered by the private sector and the students themselves.

b) Continue to Encourage the Participation of Small Business

NS Links has successfully reached out to small businesses. As pointed out by several key informants and again in the survey, *On Hire Ground*, 46% of small businesses are likely to hire individuals in the 16-24 age group. This survey found that the smaller the business, the more likely that it hired first-time employees. Additionally, they found that employers required multi-skilled workers who can perform at a high level. (*On Hire Ground, A Study of Job Creation in Canada's Small and Medium Sized Business Sector*, Canadian Federation of Independent Business, 1996).

Unlike the Telephone Survey of Employers, where the majority interviewed represented small businesses, the employers interviewed as key informants were in the majority representatives of large businesses. Generally, they had been involved in the program for at least 2 work terms and had worked with a number of *NS Links* students. Several had participated in the delivery of the training modules. All respondents valued *NS Links* as an employment program, they appreciated its uniqueness and

strongly encouraged its continuation. Small businesses in growth areas highlighted the importance of being able to hire locally and to grow locally. The small business informants felt that the emphasis on career related job transition was especially important for them.

c) Continue to Develop an Inclusionary Student Model

NS Links has been most successful in implementing the recommendations around the *NS Links* and Black Educators Association Project with 42 employers approved for the summer of 1997 alone, and the Mi'Kmaq inclusionary models with year round Mi'Kmaq control. The number of student placements, along with the wide consultative and responsive approach was quite often mentioned and positively commented upon by the key informants. There was support for a differentiated approach to specialized populations. There may be other equity groups whose needs should be addressed separately.

d) The Retention, Reduction, or Replacement of the Wage Subsidy

The program enjoys a very high level of support amongst all stakeholders and they are most eager to ensure that the program survives. There were a few comments as to the required level of pay and examples of positive and negative impact were cited. There were a number of respondents who felt that a differentiated rate of pay was needed, depending on labour market supply and demand for students in different career paths. This was considered necessary since the other aspects of this program are modeled on the realities of the workplace, so should be the rate of pay.

In the minds of many key informants the issue of an appropriate incentive to ensure the desired level of employer participation in *NS Links* has been sufficiently examined by the Department of Education and Culture. Employers feel that they make a substantial contribution to the program by providing participants with quality placements and include substantial training which is costly in terms of time and lost production. The subsidy makes this possible and sets *NS Links* apart from and superior to most other work experience programs. Provincial and RWG members believe that the impact of the subsidy on the quality level of the placements for the *NS Links* participants should be communicated to those provincial authorities responsible for negotiating a continuation of the *SNS 2000* bilateral agreement.

Benefits of Placements to Students and Employers

a) Students

Work experience in their career area is the big benefit to students. It assists in confirming their career direction or redirecting their studies to fall in line with an altered career path. Following the internship they are better able to determine what to do and where to go next in their career planning and preparation. The experience itself, and the subsequent ability to note the details of it on a resume, breaks the *Catch 22* situation of being unable to obtain a job without experience, while at the same time being unable to get the experience because no one would hire them without the experience.

The job provides the opportunity for self-marketing exposure, to build personal networks and to gain practice in dealing with others in a work environment. The students gain practice in a variety of skill areas including technological applications, working on their own and in groups, communication, responsibility, accountability, and dealing with the stress and realities of working. This multi-faceted experience is a tremendous self confidence builder and is invaluable in future job searches.

Students are able to apply academic theory to workplace reality as the placements must relate to their long-term career goals. This chance to not only see, but to also experience academic relevance along with the importance of lifelong learning in the workplace, are strong motivating factors when they return to their post-secondary program.

One of the biggest benefits identified is the opportunity for future work with the employers on a full-time, part-time or contract basis either at the end of the placement or when their post-secondary program is completed.

b) Employers

Students bring new ideas, knowledge, recent advances in technology and innovation, enthusiasm and the very big intangible — youth — to the job. Through their questions and daily interactions, they stimulate existing employees. They provide the opportunity for junior employees to teach, mentor and supervise the students, thereby making them feel more valued and helping them to develop supervisory skills.

Students assist with vacation coverage and often undertake special projects that the employer was previously unable to initiate, due to staffing and/or funding limitations.

The subsidized student enables new or struggling businesses to avail themselves of quality labour at a reasonable cost, thereby often permitting expansion and the trying of new ideas or approaches. In some cases, the student worker is instrumental in the business surviving rather than failing, or growing rather than stagnating.

Training Modules

Overall, the comments related to the 3-day training modules were more negative than positive.

The content of the sessions was seen to not relate to the job and not only could have been, but should have been, delivered prior to the beginning of the placement or after its conclusion. Further, on returning to the job after the sessions, students often indicated that the content was not relevant and the presentation at the sessions was not effective.

The 3 days were seen as interfering with the work routine and employers resented that they were required to pay the wages for these days, even though they did not have the students on the job. Students often indicated to their employers that they did not want to attend, preferring to remain on the job, which they saw as their primary commitment.

Those reacting positively to the modules saw the sessions as an opportunity for students to compare experiences and to gain added knowledge. The limited number of employers, who had participated in the sessions, were generally supportive. Most employers indicated that they had not participated in the sessions nor had they been invited to participate in any capacity.

Some employers indicated a willingness to attend or send other employees, providing the content of the sessions is relevant to their needs and that the presentations are of a high quality. There was a strong acknowledgment that training modules are a complex issue and that more than a redesign is required if they are to continue. A needs analysis directed to both employers and students was suggested as a possible beginning point.

Department of Education and Culture Role in the Transition Process

Four of the six Key Informant groups interviewed were asked specifically: "How do you think Nova Scotia Department of Education and Culture can assist students in their transition to employment?"

There is consensus in the views of the constituents interviewed. First among them is that *NS Links* is a very effective and worthwhile program, in pursuit of worthy goals, on the whole. The program's ability to address post-secondary transition through work experience in relevant career areas is recognized, and in some quarters, even celebrated. Support for the Department to continue and expand the program is strong, though there are expectations from all groups that program harmonization and rationalization is highly desirable.

There is support for cooperative education students to continue participating in *NS Links*, although direction in this area seems to have created a conflict for some *NS Links* staff, who must balance the competing demands for interns with policy decisions about representation. In two of the three semesters they have difficulty finding non-cooperative education students to fill available placements and sometimes they are not successful and placements are lost.

The Department is providing effective leadership to engage employers and other stakeholders in the transitions of post-secondary students to the work place. Respecting the former, *NS Links* serves as a strong platform to build upon employer relationships. *NS Links* draws employers to hire the targeted population, and serves as a powerful subsidy-contingent incentive for businesses to participate. However, *NS Links* has not substantially influenced the employer-government relationship.

Staff feel the pressures created by the 3 times a year cycles of marketing, recruitment and approval cycles. Staff are very supportive of the program's objectives and are seen by employers as delivering good service. Other delivery partners also identify with the quality of service and, as well, the plight faced by program administrators in the face of many competing needs and efforts. Most groups see a need to rationalize program delivery, integrating services into seamless, single-window operations.

Employers appreciate *NS Links* staff efforts, but many want to see a greater staff presence in post-placement follow-up. They also want and need a greater Departmental presence in developing and implementing database information systems, to serve a number of purposes. First among these, is the need to advertise unfilled job placements. Other groups want database applications to track program operations and outcomes, market and promote the program, and match qualified internship candidates with participating employers.

Staff suggested that the Department provide parents with more information on careers, *NS Links* and related employment programs. Staff also identify with the larger set of needs in career planning, education and transition/placement, and with a need to provide larger numbers of placements to students. Some suggested serving not-for-profit organizations through a separate, but related program initiative, similar to *NS Links* and Black Educators Association Project. The *NS Links* program achieves an admirable and difficult feat. It is seen as administratively simple by the participating employers. Few employment programs can boast this level of perceived simplicity, a feature cited by employers as among the program's best.

However, there is a good deal of administrative work to do to adapt the program to achieve greater success through it, and in developing, through a consensus process with the stakeholders, appropriate program measures, performance indicators, and outcome evaluation criteria. A major focus of the Department should be on two areas: implementing a performance measurement process and; developing and implementing administrative and technological supports to support program operations and measurement. Attention to these critical infrastructure items will strengthen the base from which *NS Links* pursues its much-needed objectives, and improve the manner in which they are achieved and measured.

HRDC'S Role

HRDC staff indicated a high level of support for *NS Links* and its objectives. There was also a high regard for the Department of Education and Culture's delivery of the program.

HRDC staff promotes the use of federal programs as a key transitional strategy, complementary to *NS Links*. They are also comfortable with their role as program brokers, and strongly advocate participant connection with Internet World Wide Web sites (such as the National Graduate register) and other labour market information resources, such as HRDC's automated Job Bank.

They recognize the importance of the business community, and recommend closer relationships between HRDC and employers, through visitations for example. HRDC's active role in, and representation on a wide range of community and governmental groups is well recognized; the concept of partnership development is supported and encouraged. They encourage the involvement of local Human Resource Centres of Canada (HRCCs) as partners with other delivery agents, and identify a need to reduce competition and increase collaboration in partnerships.

The *NS Links*/HRDC relationship at the staff level seems strong, and will serve the partners well in strengthening the delivery partnership and harmonizing program delivery, as recommended in this report.

4. Employer Telephone Survey

4.1 Introduction and General Overview

One hundred employers, from across Nova Scotia, were surveyed by telephone, with each interview lasting between 30 and 60 minutes. The breakdown by region was: 18 Cape Breton; 42 Metro; 23 Western; 17 Northern.

Private sector employers were in the majority, with 76% surveyed. The remaining 24% were non-profit organizations with one-third of them having private sector partners.

Over one half of the employers surveyed (57%), could be described as small employers (1-10 employees); 16% were medium size employers (11-25 employees); and 27% were large employers (more than 25 employees). Using the federal Standard Industrial Classification guidelines, the 100 employers are classified as follows:

3	Agricultural Industries
4	Fishing and Trapping Industries
1	Logging and Forestry Industries
3	Mining, Quarrying and Oil Well Industries
6	Manufacturing Industries
3	Construction Industries
1	Transportation and Storage Industries
5	Communications and Other Utility Industries
1	Wholesale Trade Industries
12	Retail Trade Industries
4	Finance and Insurance Industries
20	Business Service Industries
4	Government Service Industries
8	Education Service Industries
10	Health and Social Service Industries
7	Accommodation, Food and Beverage Service Industries
8	Other Service Industries

Note: 1) Regional differences are noted where significant

4.2 Key Findings

Bridges to Long Term Employment

Nearly 80% of employers indicated that most interns were ready for entry level employment in their career area at the conclusion of their placements. Many of those who were judged to be not ready required more education and/or training. Over half of the employers said that they had offered employment to graduating interns.

Training Modules

The response of employers to the training modules was generally not favourable with only 40% indicating that they believed they were beneficial to the students. Suggestions were made as to how to make them more beneficial to the students and at the same time open up attendance to other employees.

Employer Commitment to Lifelong Learning

Ninety-five percent of employers indicated that their organization supported the concept of lifelong learning in the workplace. Further, they indicated strongly that they had a major responsibility as employers for the upgrading, training and retraining of their employees. There was little support for specialized training for their employees which would be provided through *NS Links*.

Partnerships

Post-secondary educators are generally seen as not playing a significant role in *NS Links*. Further, that their commitment to the work force transitions of their students is limited. Employers indicated a high level of desire for an increased post-secondary involvement with the work place.

Wage Subsidy

The existence of a wage subsidy is seen by nearly 90% of employers as important to their participation in *NS Links*, with a 50% subsidy viewed as most appropriate for both them and government. A rate below 40% is seen as problematic by many and would, in all probability, result in a large exodus of employers from the program.

Other forms of subsidy, e.g., tax incentive, training and education vouchers, are supported by less than 50% of employers and are seen as requiring considerable more "selling" to employers to obtain their participation than a wage subsidy.

Attracting NS Links Employers

Personal contact with employers by students, who introduce the *NS Links* concept, along with newspaper advertisements, were the principle ways that *NS Links* employers became aware of the program. Employer information packages, used by students approaching prospective employers, and supported by newspaper advertisements are viewed as the best way to recruit new employers.

Employer Satisfaction

Ninety-one percent of employers indicated that they were either very satisfied or satisfied with their *NS Links* students. Seventy-six percent intend to re-apply in the future and 3/4 of those who do not intend to re-apply indicated that it was due to a lack of funding on their part or there was no need for additional employees.

4.3 Analysis and Observations

Experience with NS Links

a) Number of *NS Links* Students Since Summer '95

Approximately 230 students have been employed by the 100 participating employers since the program officially began with the summer term of 1995. One half of these employers had employed one student. Twenty-two percent had 2 students and the remaining 28% had employed 3 or more students.

b) Number of *NS Links* Students Working Winter Term '97/98

At the time the survey was conducted, 30 students in total were employed by 25% of the surveyed employers. The remaining 75% had previously employed a student, but did not have one this term.

Student Intern Impact

a) Employer Perception of How Internship Benefits Student Participants

Employers cited two areas as being of the greatest benefit to students: obtaining work experience and orientation to the workplace (cited by 90%); and skill training related to students' career choice (cited by 85%). Improving student opportunities for obtaining permanent employment is a perceived benefit of the program, with more than half of the employers acknowledging this feature. Only the above features were cited by more than half of the employer respondents. More than 90% of employers were satisfied with the duration of the training placement internships.

b) Employment Readiness of *NS Links* Participants

Nearly 80% of the employers surveyed felt that all or most interns were ready for employment at the entry-level at the time they completed their internship placement. Cape Breton employers were among the most pleased with the students, with 83% stating all their interns were ready for employment by completion. This was borne out in the in-person stakeholder interviews.

Throughout the survey portion of the study (as elsewhere), there is strong support and recognition of students' ability to contribute to the workplace, even in temporary and often initial placements. However, about one in ten employers felt none of their participants were job ready. On a regional basis, perception was proportionately greater in the Northern and Western regions. No Cape Breton employers related any difficulty with their interns.

Educational requirements for entry-level jobs in some industries (e.g. pharmacy) are by definition in excess of the qualifications most students possess at the time of their placement. Employers in these areas perceived their students' lack of final educational achievement or accreditation as being 'not entry-level job ready'.

c) Offers of Employment to Graduating Interns

Fifty-two percent of the employers indicated that they offered employment to their graduating interns. Part-time employment was offered to a substantial number of interns who were returning to school.

As expected, interns returning to school to receive further education and training was cited most often as the reason for employers not granting employment offers. Lack of available jobs and unacceptable trainees were cited by a small number of employers.

d) Employer Benefits from Student Intern Participation

More than 63% of the employers felt that students brought new ideas, enthusiasm, knowledge and skills to the workplace. This was very consistent across regions.

Training Modules

a) Benefits of the Training Modules to Students

Employer response to the training modules was generally not favourable. Only 40% of the employers thought the training modules were beneficial to the students. The Northern and Western regions saw the greatest benefit of the modules with 59% and 50% in support, respectively, while in Metro only 20% viewed them favourably.

b) Ways to Improve the Modules

Less than half of the surveyed employers on average, and only 11% of Cape Breton employers, had suggestions on improving the modules. However, where suggestions were forthcoming, they focused on both employer and student needs that could be met through this component.

As examples of student training, employers' recommendations focus primarily on areas related to the workplace, including providing workplace orientation; relevant work skills, labour market survival skills; and safety training, with less emphasis on job-search preparation activities. Employers' suggestions for their own training covered a variety of areas, from liability insurance to program administration.

c) Employer Participation in the Modules

Ninety percent of employers never participated in the training modules, though this is largely due to no one having asked. Surprisingly, employer interest was high. Only one in five employers stated they had either insufficient interest or time to be involved in the off-site training in some way, with the exception of Cape Breton, where fewer employers felt available to participate (39% available compared to 80% provincially). The reason for lack of participation in Cape Breton was almost equally split between not having been asked and not having time.

Employers were evenly split on whether they should be invited to participate, as a way to increase their involvement in the modules. Support was slightly higher in the Cape Breton and Western regions and lower in Metro.

Forty-six percent of the employers supported a policy of inviting other members of their staff to participate in the training sessions. Holding the modules outside working hours was a suggestion supported by only 22% of employers.

d) Contribution of the Modules to Lifelong Learning

The training modules were not viewed very favourably by employers as a vehicle to lifelong learning, although they are very supportive of the concept. More employers felt the training modules were not significantly contributing to the concept of lifelong learning.

Metro and Cape Breton differed widely in their views of this item. Nearly half of the Cape Breton employers felt the modules achieved lifelong learning objectives, and only 11% had a negative response. In Metro, employers were least supportive, with only 21% feeling the modules contributed to lifelong-learning, and nearly half opposed. More than a third had no opinion.

e) Overall Rating of the Training Modules

Asked outright if they saw the training modules as positive negative or neutral, about one-third of the surveyed employers felt positive (31%), a second third were neutral (32%) and about 15% saw the modules in a negative light. There were notable regional differences in the overall ratings of the modules. Negative response was highest from Metro, with nearly half of the employers (45%) expressing an overall negative view. No negative views were expressed by any Cape Breton employers, with half being positive and the other being neutral or holding no opinion.

f) Employer Views on Who Has Responsibility for Education and Training of Employees

Employers have a clear commitment to training. They put responsibility for upgrading, training and retraining mostly upon themselves (60% of the cases surveyed). There were wild swings on this item; fewer employers in Cape Breton (39%), and more in the Western region (96%) took responsibility for training. Thirty percent of all employers surveyed felt employees bore the sole responsibility.

Employers' responses to the government, employers and employees sharing responsibility for the development of partnerships was tepid, with only 30% agreeing to the shared responsibility.

Almost no one, conversely, felt it was governments' job alone: 7% of employers province-wide, with Cape Breton at a high of 22%. Support for all three collaborating on this issue was highest in Cape Breton (56%) and the Northern region (47%), and lowest in the Western region at only 4% (1 out of 17 surveyed employers).

There is obviously employer recognition of their own role in training, but outside of financial support they do not generally identify with the other training stakeholders, other than their employees. The survey responses raise major questions about employers' perceptions of partnerships in training, outside of the need for and attractiveness of the wage-subsidy component. These issues will be discussed further when examining the partnership questions in the survey.

It may be comforting to know, however, that employers are not about to leave education and training responsibilities merely to fate or chance. Every employer felt someone had to be responsible: the option *no one* is *responsible* was ruled out by those surveyed.

g) Impact of Lifelong Learning in the Workplace

At least nine out of ten employers surveyed, professed to be familiar with lifelong learning as a concept (only 11% claimed not to understand it), and almost all of them have an opinion on its impact in the workplace. The most cited visible effects of lifelong learning were *improved worker performance* (cited by 51% of respondents) and *worker motivation* (44%).

Results here are most encouraging, though perhaps not surprising. The language and issues of competition, downsizing and productivity as employment factors have long been mainstream, as illustrated in the literature.

Even more encouragement can be gained from employers' commitment to lifelong learning. Fully 95% of employers responded that their organizations promoted the concept in their workplace, consistent across all regions.

This question provoked one of the most lucrative responses, as examples and suggestions about this commitment were provided from employers in all four regions. Even very small employers described a commendable range of worker/learner experiences and opportunities for their staff. Their demonstrated commitment included: financial assistance to learners; circulation of literature; certification programs and processes; multiple in-house and third-party training initiatives; employee counselling; creating research opportunities; providing academic upgrading and GED; computers (and computers and computers!); and providing support and encouragement of employee education as a company policy.

h) Forms of In-Service or Special Training Needs that *NS Links* Could Provide

Despite high levels of stated employer commitment to training, less than one-third of employers identified with *NS Links* providing it, and more than half felt there was no such training required from *NS Links*. This, of course, may only be proprietary behaviour. Though it is difficult from this response alone to conclude that employers don't support government training, or more precisely government delivery of training, this interpretation is consistent with employers' views of governments' role in it.

However, those who saw opportunities for such training to be provided did not lack foresight about training needs, and provided, again, a broad range of responses similar to those identified elsewhere, including orienting and educating students about the needs of the competitive workplace. Most examples were focused on *soft skills* for students, including report writing and presentation skills, job search skills, communication and interpersonal skills. As in prior questions, employers were also very willing to cite their own learning needs, and listed as suggestions training for themselves ranging *from being a good NS Links employe*r to a workshop about other *NS Links* employers.

Although spontaneous support for specialized training via *NS Links* is not in evidence in the survey, employer-identified needs are abundant, and they exist in areas where employers feel educational institutions and governments are being insufficiently responsive.

There is an opportunity to use the training modules more creatively, and in a manner more responsive to the needs of employers as articulated in this survey and study. It is recommended that the Department review options for engaging employers in a dialogue about their special and in-service training needs, and that such needs as can be identified be responded to via the training modules. Multiple and locally supported delivery options should be explored, along with ways to do cross-employer training on topics of mutual concern to the employers and interns.

Efforts to engage employers must address working in partnership to respond to common training needs on the sectoral, regional, local and industrial bases.

Post-secondary Educators

a) Importance of Post-Secondary Educators to *NS Links*

Only 47% of employers felt that there was a very significant to significant relationship between post-secondary educators and the program. Half felt they played no role at all, with 78% of the Western Region's employers of this opinion. Cape Breton was an exception, with 73% of employers identifying with post-secondary educators' role in academic preparation and post-placement remedial instruction.

b) Employers' Perception of Post-Secondary Institutions' Commitment to the Work Force and to Industry

Only half of the employers felt that post-secondary institutions have a commitment to the work force and to industry. Nearly four in ten feel that this commitment is not in place. The Northern and Cape Breton regions expressed the most optimistic views in this area (59% and 78% respectively), with the Western region most pessimistic in their opinion, 61% of employers believing that the commitment is not there. Cape Breton employers were the least critical of the commitment from the institutions, with only 17% of the negative opinion.

Rich, if varied, examples of this commitment being both demonstrated and absent were abundantly supplied. Employers talked positively about a variety of educational institution relationships, ranging from participation in curriculum design and review committees to shared research, partnerships and joint initiatives. Critics spoke of schools being out of touch, and emphasized the need for communication.

c) Employers' Views on an Expanded Role for Educators

In contrast to the lack of confidence expressed by employers about post-secondary educators and institutions, two-thirds wanted them to play an expanded role. Their recommendations were vastly in favour of two themes: providing experiential, practical, workplace oriented training and education for students, and educators spending more time in the workplace to become more current and practical in their educational practices, policies and understanding of employer and labour market issues.

d) Employers' Involvement with Post-Secondary Educators

Few Nova Scotia employers described their relationship with post-secondary educators as significant (20%), with the exception of the Cape Breton region (56%). University College of Cape Breton (UCCB) was often cited as a most successful outreach institution.

e) Impact of *NS Links* on Employer Involvement with Post-Secondary Institutions

Consistent across regions, eight out of ten employers did not feel that the program made a difference in their relationship with post-secondary schools, other than as an employer of interns.

f) Impact of *NS Links* on Communication Between Employers and Post-Secondary Institutions

Six out of ten employers do not feel *NS Links* has changed their communication with post-secondary institutions. Responses in the Cape Breton and Northern regions illustrated improvements in communication stronger than those reported elsewhere in the Province.

g) Opinion Whether *NS Links* Should Foster Better Communication

Two-thirds responded affirmatively, one-quarter negatively. The only marked difference was in Cape Breton, with 73% affirmative and only 6% negative. Responding to how this may be achieved, the emphasis was on promoting linkages through the *NS Links* program. *Educator — know the workplace was repeated as a theme.*

h) Employers' Perceptions of the Benefits of *NS Links* to Post-Secondary Educators

The benefit most employers agreed upon was the program's capacity to provide students an opportunity to apply classroom theory. Second was the opportunity for educators to garner input for a more relevant curriculum.

Government — Private Sector Partnerships

a) *NS Links* Improves Student Employability through Creating Public-Private Sector Relationships

Eighty per cent of employers felt the program achieves this desired improvement in student employability, with only 12% responding negatively. This very positive response was consistent throughout the regions. The question elicited a stream of support for *NS Links*, its objectives and how the program linked the curricula, education and the work place.

Contributions being made by both parties, and having two-way communication were cited as important elements in a public-private sector partnership.

b) Contribution of Partners

Eighty per cent of all employers surveyed and 100% of the Cape Breton respondents felt that governments should contribute funding. No other item of contribution came close, the next most cited being "Leadership", with 44% of employers indicating that this was their expectation for government agreeing to this feature.

Employers were nearly unanimous in touting their own responsibilities for providing new learning opportunities and experience for workers, but were divided on whether it was their responsibility to provide permanent jobs and/or wage contributions to these learning workers.

Funding of Links

Importance of Wage Subsidy

Across the Province, nearly 90% of employers felt the wage subsidy was important to their participation in *NS Links*, with over 80% describing it as "crucial".

The level of wage subsidy (below which employers no longer want to participate) selected most often was a 50% subsidy (44% of employers). An additional 20% of employers cited a 33% rate as the minimum, and 11% of employers said that a 40% wage subsidy was the lowest level that would hold their interest.

Employers also spoke in the interviews about the competition among programs. Wage subsidy rate-shopping is a likely phenomenon, which may impact on *NS Links* as the rate has dropped to below 50% and is now lower than some other programs. *NS Links* was referred to as the program of choice due to the career-related nature of the initiative.

Employers felt by an overwhelming majority that the best incentive for employers is to retain the wage subsidy feature of *NS Links* (88%). All the alternatives suggested were pale favourites in comparison. In order of alternative preference they were favoured as follows: tax incentive (41% of employers); a training voucher for employers (24%), and an education voucher for students (20%).

Evolution of NS Links

a) First Awareness of *NS Links*

Thirty-one percent of the employers indicated that they first became aware of *NS Links* through a newspaper advertisement. Other forms of advertisement, including newspaper articles, campus publications, radio and brochures yielded only a further 16%. Significantly, 34% in total learned through personal contact with either students (16%), business associates (14%) or *NS Links* staff (4%).

b) Best Ways to Promote *NS Links*

Employers, when asked to identify the 3 best ways to promote *NS Links*, indicated an Employer Information Package (60%), newspapers (52%) and a student approach to prospective employers (51%). Contact through Chambers of Commerce (10%) and professional associations (13%) were viewed as less effective.

c) Normally Hire Students Over the Summer

Provincially, 82% indicated that they normally hired summer students. The figures ranged from a low of 74% in Metro to 94% in the Northern region.

d) Reasons for Not Participating Earlier in *NS Links*

Sixty percent of employers indicated that they were unaware of the program and a further 19% did not know why they had not participated earlier. The remaining reasons included; cost, even with the subsidy; lack of need; earlier rejections of applications.

e) Reasons for Deciding to Participate in *NS Links*

Eighty-six percent of employers elected to participate because of the wage-subsidy. Twenty-five percent of employers also cited the capacity of the program to assist them to meet short-term needs for workers.

f) Plans to Hire Before Learning of *NS Links*

NS Links is not in itself the inspiration to hire. Fifty-eight percent of employers stated they intended to hire before learning of the program, and 68% said they had used other programs for placement purposes, such as Cooperative Education, HRDC programs, ECBC programs, and so on.

g) Clear Understanding of Procedures and Employer Responsibilities

Provincially, 80% of employers felt that the *NS Links* staff provided them with a clear understanding of procedures and their responsibilities at the time they agreed to participate. However, in Metro this figure dropped to 66%, and when asked, if not at the time they agreed to participate when did they arrive at a clear understanding, 50% said early in the program, 25% half way through and 20% never.

h) Frequency of Contact With *NS Links* Staff

Sixty percent had a contact frequency of two or more times during the placement. Thirty-one percent indicated only one contact and 7% had no contact at all. Regionally, 94% in Cape Breton were contacted two or more times. In Metro only 40.5% had this level of contact, 40.5% were contacted once, 14% not at all and 5% did not know.

Contact with *NS Links* staff was viewed as just right by 75% of the employers, while 25% would have preferred more contact. In Metro, where the contact level was significantly lower than in the other regions, 38% would have preferred more contact.

i) Changes to *NS Links* Program

Seventy-seven percent of employers either don't know or believe that no changes have been made to the *NS Links* program since they agreed to participate. Those that indicated there were changes, believed that the changes dealt with the subsidy.

When asked about how the changes were communicated to them the response was weak, with 69% not knowing how the changes were communicated, and the remainder thinking that it was done through a procedures manual, memorandum or by a telephone call.

On the question of who did the changes benefit, 84% did not know and 16% thought it was the government.

j) Level of Satisfaction with the Interns

Satisfaction levels were high, with 70% of employers very satisfied, and an additional 21% satisfied. Cape Breton employers were the happiest, with 100% saying they were *very satisfied* with their interns.

k) Best Features of Links

Ninety-seven percent of employers liked the wage subsidy feature best. Seventy-two percent liked the duration of placement and 56% cited the ease of program administration.

l) Worst Features of Links

Remarkably, the most common response in all regions was *'no worst features'*. Concern was expressed for the delays in receiving approvals, restrictions or inflexibility with respect to the duration and timing of hiring. Other comments were varied and not especially thematic.

m) Interest in Re-applying for a Student

Seventy-six percent intend to re-apply in the future for a *NS Links* student. Cape Breton employers, at 83%, were the highest in indicating their intent to re-apply.

For those not intending to re-apply, 43% said that they could not afford to hire another *NS Links* student, 30% do not have a need, and 13% had previously had a bad experience with a *NS Links* student. It should be noted that 3 of the 4 Northern region employers, who do not intend to re-apply, said it was because they could not afford to pay.

Additional Input

A variety of comments were made when employers were invited to make any additional comments they wished.

Twenty-five percent of all employers surveyed indicated in this section that they were pleased with the program and most of these said that they hoped that it would continue. Flexibility, either with the work term dates, work term length or the program criteria were raised by a significant number. A strong plea was made here as it was also with the Key Informants, to have an extension of the program eligibility for graduates beyond the current four months.

Some employers took this opportunity to compliment the *NS Links* staff on doing a good job. However, a significant number, approximately 10%, raised a variety of bureaucratic and administrative concerns.

5. *Links Student Participant Survey*

5.1 Introduction and General Overview

In the initial phase of the evaluation, interviews and telephone surveys were conducted with 100 participant employers and 60 Key Informants, including *NS Links* Project Officers, Post-Secondary Educators and Administrators, Provincial Steering Committee Members, HRDC Officers, RWGs and Participant Employers.

The data clearly indicated that *NS Links* was perceived favourably and was well supported by both employers and other stakeholders. Significantly, the study showed that impressive numbers of *NS Links* participants were being hired at the completion of their placement.

This second phase of the evaluation contains direct input from 150 former *NS Links* student participants and was obtained through telephone interviews.

In addition to relating student input to the program objectives, this study of *NS Links* former student participants focused on the following questions.

- How do participants perceive the benefits of *NS Links*?
- How do participants view the *NS Links* program?
- What factors influence career choices of participants, and what effect did *NS Links* have on choice of career or study?
- What concerns do participants have insofar as employment is concerned?
- Is there a difference in employment success between college, private trade school and university graduates?
- Are there significant differences in entry-level starting salaries between college, private trade school and university graduates?
- How many *NS Links* participants have a cooperative education experience as part of their post-secondary education?
- What relationships were created or strengthened as a result of *NS Links* participation?
- What is the employment situation of participants following their *NS Links* experience?

Survey questions were developed in consultation with the evaluation committee.

A representative sample of *NS Links* participants in 1996 and 1997 was developed from the existing participant database. Care was taken to select a balanced cross section of

participants from university, college and private trade school graduates and coming from a variety of academic and education backgrounds. Telephone interviews of approximately 30 minutes each were conducted.

Sample Quotations from Students

> *"NS Links was my career break!"*
>
> *"This program should be more widely available. It opened the door for me. I had been unemployed previously. HRDC sponsored me for my training and NS Links provided me with my entry opportunity."*
>
> *"I can't say enough about the training contribution of my NS Links employer. He taught me, he coached me and he continues to mentor me. To have a friend as well as a mentor in my chosen career area is just great. He has done that for many students under NS Links and this program is wonderful. I didn't accept the job offer with this company since I could earn more elsewhere and get a different kind of experience. This in no way diminishes the contribution this program makes to students."*
>
> *"I'm a recycled industrial worker who needed experience to break into my career area. NS Links provided me with this opportunity."*
>
> *"Relocating is necessary in today's world and I will take the opportunities as they come along."*
>
> *"I probably would have found a job, likely at minimum wage, and most likely not an engineering job. I wouldn't be where I am now without NS Links."*

5.2 Key Findings

Wage Subsidy

The wage subsidy was seen by former student participants as an important factor in their employers' participation in *NS Links*, with 1/3 believing that without the subsidy there would not have been a position available for them.

Training Modules

Over 60% of the former student participants viewed the training modules favourably, with only 30% believing them to not be beneficial. Sessions on entrepreneurship and networking were the most highly regarded.

Bridges to Long Term Employment

Eighty-four (84%) of the former student participants contacted were working at the time they were interviewed. A further 8% were enrolled in further education programs or unavailable for work and only 8% were seeking employment.

Value of Links Placements

The work placement was seen by almost all participants as extremely helpful in assisting them to confirm their career direction and in a number of cases led directly to major program changes and for others minor changes. Forty-seven (47%) of the former participants are currently employed by their *NS Links* employers. Those working elsewhere indicated that the *NS Links* experience in their career area along with the opportunity to create and consolidate professional networks were invaluable to them in their job search.

Starting Salaries

Fifty-one (51%) of the former university participants and 22% of the former college and private trade school participants are earning over $30,000.

Employer Contacts

One third (1 of 3) of the former *NS Links* participants knew someone in the company where they were hired for their *NS Links* placement and over 80% believed that this contact was helpful in them being hired.

Competitive Interviews

Over 80% of the former *NS Links* participants were interviewed in competition with others before they were hired for their placement. Those that were not hired after their placement felt that the experience of the competitive interview was very helpful, when they were applying for long term employment.

5.3 Analysis and Observations

Introduction

The following table provides an overview of the sample of former *NS Links* students who took part in the telephone survey.

University Students			98 Interviewed	
Degree Program	**Number Interviewed**	**Graduates**	**Links 95-96**	**Links 96-97**
Engineering	17	17	11	6
Science	28	25	15	13
Pharmacy	4	4	4	0
Law	4	4	3	1
Commerce and Administration	23	20	13	10
Arts	22	20	8	14
Totals	**98**	**90**	**54**	**44**

College Students			52 Interviewed	
Diploma Program	**Number Interviewed**	**Graduates**	**Links 95-96**	**Links 96-97**
General	29	28	11	18
Business	8	6	2	6
Information Systems	15	14	10	5
Totals	52	48	23	29
Overall Totals	**150**	**138**	**77**	**73**

The input received from the former *NS Links* students is grouped under the questions listed previously in the Introduction section. Following the responses to the questions is a series of observations and analysis which relate to specific university and college/trade school programs.

5.3.1 Responses to Questions

1. How do participants perceive the benefits of *NS Links*?

It is clear from the surveys that *NS Links* enjoys a high level of support among the participants. On many occasions parents of these former students were spoken to, and they also gave *NS Links* a high level of approval.

a) **Relevant Work Experience**
Students clearly understand that their prospects for long-term employment will be increased if they have relevant experience. They see *NS Links* as providing this relevant experience as well as an opportunity to prove themselves in the work place. Work experience in their career area is seen as valuable for their résumés and very clearly resolves the dilemma many faced of being unable to be considered for employment because they had no appropriate work experience.

b) **Networking Opportunities**
Others mentioned that they were able to create and consolidate professional networks. They were also able to connect with their *NS Links* employer's networks.

c) **Reference Letter**
Many said that a letter of reference from their employer was a very positive thing.

d) **Skills Building and Acquisition**
Through their *NS Links* experience, students were provided with an opportunity to acquire and consolidate skills which they believe will improve their chances for meaningful employment.

2. How do participants view the *NS Links* program?

a) **Participant Expectations**
NS Links was regarded very highly with respect to the participants realizing their expectations of the program (93%).

b) **Wage Subsidy**
The wage subsidy was viewed as very or extremely important to their employers' participation in *NS Links* by 87% of the participants. Six per cent said it was moderately important and seven per cent felt that it was not important. Approximately one third of participants felt that their employer would not have had a position available for them without the subsidy.

c) **Participant Loan Needs**
The participants were evenly divided on the impact of the wages earned in their *NS Links* job on their borrowing needs in the next school term. One half indicated that the impact was significant and that their borrowing needs were reduced in the next term while the other half felt that the effect was minimal.

d) **Links Expectations**
Eighty-eight percent of the participants had at least one contact during their placement with a *NS Links* field officer. Most of those who had no contact with a field officer indicated that they felt they should have been visited, while many of those with only one contact would have appreciated more. The contacts are a very useful mechanism for conveying to participants that they are in the *NS Links* program.

e) **Training Modules**

Virtually all students had participated in the training modules. Training modules were viewed favourably by 62% of the participants, 5% had mixed feelings, 3% didn't attend the sessions and the remaining 30% did not view the sessions as beneficial. Sessions related to entrepreneurship, resume writing, leadership, networking, Internet access and job search were seen as most beneficial. The major criticisms related to a lack of content relevancy and the presentation skills of some leaders.

f) **Links Awareness Is Created By Employers**

Most students learned of *NS Links* through contact with their future *NS Links* employers. This awareness occurred during the interview for the position, when the employer informed them that *NS Links* would be paying a portion of their salary or, when they reported for work at the beginning of their placement.

g) **Interviews and Obtaining the Job**

Thirty-four percent of the participants knew someone in the company before they were hired and 82% of these participants felt that this contact was helpful in their hiring. Fully 81% of all participants were required to be interviewed competitively before they were offered their *NS Links* sponsored job.

h) **End of Program Assessment**

Employers provided performance assessment for 63% of the participants and 69% of the participants prepared a written report at the conclusion of their *NS Links* placements.

3. What factors influence career choices of participants and what effect did *NS Links* have on choice of career or study?

a) **Choosing Career Area**

The most common determinant quoted by students for choosing their career area was their academic ability in a specific discipline. Almost as important was the expected salary level and availability of jobs in their field. The majority of students were pursuing a career in an area not previously explored by others in their families or amongst their significant others.

b) **Links Effect on Career or Program**

Ninety percent of the students reported that the *NS Links* experience helped them confirm their career direction along with providing valuable work experience in their career area. More than 50% reported that the experience impacted on their subsequent post-secondary program. For some the impact was major and took the form of a change to a completely different program, for others the change was to courses within their program, while for others it was in their attitude towards their studies.

4. What concerns do participants have insofar as employment is concerned?

Breaking into the local job market, rather than relocating, is a strong desire by many students. However, there is a recognition that for some, there are no or very limited job opportunities in their career area in the local community, and in some cases in the province. They don't want to relocate but they reluctantly acknowledge that this may be necessary.

For those students who are not working, as well as some who are underemployed, there was a generally poor awareness of appropriate job search techniques. This is distressing given the many opportunities for students to be exposed to sessions on job search techniques while in school and as one of the *NS Links* training modules. More importantly, a number of students reported that the local economic conditions were such that they would not be able to work. A sense of resignation to these factors is causing some of these students to be passive in their job search. In an economy where mobility and adaptability are critical to employment, it does appear that a more active work/career coaching program might bring important and much required changes.

Students in outlying areas reported transportation difficulties; simply getting to potential job opportunities in areas of higher economic activity was problematic.

5. Is there a difference in employment success between college, private trade school and university graduates?

Eighty-four percent of all participants indicated that they were working in June 1998, with there being virtually no difference between university and college/trade school graduates. A further 8% are either still enrolled in an education program or are unavailable for work, leaving only 8% as actively searching for employment. This compares favourably with the *"Survey of 1996 University Graduates"*, conducted by Baseline Market Research Inc. for the Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission, which reported a 90.1% employment rate for 1996 university graduates in Nova Scotia.

Fifty-eight percent of college/private trade school and 42% of university graduates are with their *NS Links* employers.

College/private trade school students did not appear to consider mobility even within their own province as readily as university students.

6. Are there significant differences in entry-level starting salaries between college/private trade school and university graduates?

Salary Range			University Graduates	
Degree Program	**% Under $20,000**	**% $20,001-$30,000**	**$30,001-$40,000**	**% Over $40,000**
Engineering	0	21	43	36
Science	5	15	60	20
Pharmacy	0	0	25	75
Law	5	100	0	0
Commerce and Administration	12	68	16	11
Arts	12	69	19	0
Totals	**5**	**44**	**33**	**18**

Salary Range		College/Private Trade School Graduates		
Diploma Program	**% Under $20,000**	**% $20,001-$30,000**	**$30,001-$40,000**	**% Over $40,000**
General	27	58	15	0
Business	43	43	14	0
Information Systems	17	42	25	17
Totals	**27**	**51**	**18**	**4**

Fifty-one percent of university graduates compared to 22% of college/private trade school graduates are earning over $30,000.

Science, engineering and pharmacy graduates are earning the highest salaries with 80% earning more than $30,000.

Twenty-seven percent of college/private trade school graduates compared to 5% of university graduates are earning under $20,000.

7. How many *NS Links* participants have a cooperative education experience as part of their post-secondary education?

Almost 60% of *NS Links* participants reported no prior experience with cooperative education programs. Virtually no participants experienced cooperative education in secondary school.

It is interesting to note that Arts students had the lowest participation rate (18%) in post-secondary cooperative education programs, compared to 57% for science, engineering and business students. Surprisingly, at the college/private trade school level, 48% of students in non-business and computer areas previously had a cooperative education experience.

University Students	
Science	57%
Engineering	59%
Pharmacy	0%
Law	50%
Commerce	57%
General Arts	18%
Total	**46%**

College/Private Trade School Students	
General	48%
Information Systems	20%
Business	0%
Total	**33%**

8. What relationships were created or strengthened as a result of *NS Links* participation?

Many students reported that the four-month *NS Links* work experience period offered them opportunities to develop long-term relationships and to establish personal networks. Further, that their employers were continuing as professional friends or mentors. This appeared to be especially important to students whose families were not themselves, highly schooled.

9. What is the employment situation of participants following their *NS Links* experience?

Many students confirmed that they had been offered long-term employment at the end of their placement: 51% of university participants were offered jobs by their *NS Links* employers and 70% accepted the offer; 85% of college/private trade school participants were offered jobs and 85% accepted.

Having acquired the initial work experience with a participant employer, some students went on to secure positions with customers, suppliers and competitors.

Forty-eight percent of former students employed are working for their *NS Links* employers (42% university graduates and 58% of college/private trade school graduates).

Sixty-three percent of engineering graduates are with their former *NS Links* employers while none of the law graduates, and only 30% of the science graduates are now working for their *NS Links* employers.

5.3.2 Analysis and Observations by University and College/Private Trade School Programs

The telephone surveys were examined on a program basis. Observations follow for each of the following academic programs:

University
Pharmacy
Law
Arts
Commerce and Administration
Science
Engineering

College/Private Trade School
General
Business
Information Systems

Note

The sample size for each academic grouping is too small to be statistically accurate, however, it does accurately reflect the views and data provided by the former *NS Links* students contacted through the telephone survey.

At the beginning of each academic program grouping there is a sampling of information related to one or two of the former students interviewed. In some cases actual quotations are included. Letters are used instead of names to keep their identity anonymous.

a) University Pharmacy Group

"D" took an undergraduate degree in microbiology without a specific career destination. He said that he was a good student of mathematics and sciences in high school. While in his undergraduate program he took pharmacy courses and it piqued his interest in pharmacy. He said:

"NS Links provided me with the opportunity to get my foot in the door.

The Leadership training module was really thought provoking and it has helped me in dealing with customers. A large part of a pharmacist job is client interactive and I learned so much about myself and about others in that training module.

Everyone should have a chance to do this program. When I interviewed for a job, my prospective employer told me about NS Links and it afforded me an opportunity in a pharmacy job in my community. I learned a lot during that placement and I was treated as a professional.

A relationship with my future employer was established.

Upon the completion of my degree I was offered a job which I gladly accepted.

The NS Links opportunity was good for my employer, my community, and myself."

Analysis and Observations

All pharmacy students have a built in graduated work experience training component. Students must work three different sessions. Getting a paid summer employment opportunity is sometimes a challenge, and additionally so at a rate above minimum wage. Students indicated that they sometimes volunteer to work in order to get their foot in the door. Since some of the students were volunteering and known to the employer they did not necessarily have to interview for their job.

Four participants were interviewed, and all have graduated. One graduated in 1996 and 3 in 1997. The *NS Links* experience for all of them took place in the summer of 1995-96.

The wage subsidy was viewed as very or extremely important by all four with half believing the subsidy was essential for the availability of their job. All were paid above minimum wage.

Every one of them indicated their appreciation for the training modules.

Three of four knew someone in the company before they were hired and two of the three felt that their contact was helpful in their hiring. Two were interviewed along with others for the job.

All viewed the training modules favorably. The entrepreneurship session was perceived as the most beneficial especially for anyone interested in becoming an independent pharmacist.

All employers provided a performance assessment to participants at the end of their placement and three of four indicated that the assessment was discussed with them. All participants completed a final report for *NS Links*.

Individual expectations of the *NS Links* placement were realized by all participants and all indicated that it was in their career area, helping to confirm their career direction.

Further, three of four reported that the experience definitely impacted on their subsequent post-secondary program.

Two of four indicated that the wages earned during the *NS Links* experience had a significant impact on the amount of borrowing required in the subsequent school term.

Two of four participants said that they were offered a job by their *NS Links* employer and both accepted the offer.

All are currently employed with three of the students interviewed working in the province and the fourth, for personal reasons, working out of the province. Two are with their *NS Links* employer.

Along with the obvious benefit of being hired by their *NS Links* employer, participants found the wages earned and the job references they received as the major benefits.

The 4 currently employed indicated the following salary range:

0	under $20,000
0	$20,001 — $30,000
1	$30,001 — $40,000
3	over $40,000

b) University Law Group

"Though I worked in a support position I was given the opportunity to do various legal tasks that demonstrated my ability. Over the summer I gained more confidence, got to know more of the lawyers in other firms and they got to know me. When it came to finding an articling job, I had a network and I was known to some of the lawyers in other firms in my part of the province. I got an articling job, and I am on my way.

I am glad to be consulted about NS Links. I think everyone in the province should have this opportunity like I did. This is an excellent investment and the entire program was good for me.

I met other students who are beginning in the field of work and in various disciplines. As a lawyer this is good for me.

The training modules were good in other ways. Everyone assumes we know how to market ourselves. I can tell you that for me it was extremely helpful."

Analysis and Observations

Although the sample size was very small (4), law students exhibited similar career transition anxieties to the other surveyed students. Though they had chosen a specialized area, there was no clear path as to how to parlay their educational background into a job. Students understood that they needed to get pertinent work experience, and create professional networks as one of the students expressed, "some real work experience that gives us a foot in the door".

All four have graduated — one in 1996 and three in 1997. The *NS Links* experience for 3 occurred in 1995-96 and for 1 in 1996-97.

The law students spoke of the difficulties faced by many of their classmates in finding an articling position. *NS Links* provided the employer with the opportunity of hiring a summer student.

Two of four knew someone in the company before they were hired and both felt that their contact was helpful in their hiring. Two of the four were interviewed along with others for the job.

Two of four viewed the training modules favourably while the other two felt that they were not beneficial to them at the time, nor were they beneficial later when they were looking for permanent employment. The major criticisms were that the sessions were too long and lacked variety in content.

The wage subsidy was viewed as extremely important by three and moderately important by the remaining participant. All believed that the subsidy was essential for the availability of their job.

Three of four employers provided a performance assessment to participants at the end of their placement and all indicated that the assessment was discussed with them. Three of the four participants completed a final report.

Individual expectations of the *NS Links* placement were realized by all participants, and all indicated that it was in their career area, helping to confirm their career direction. Only one of four reported that the experience impacted on their subsequent post-secondary program.

One of the two returning to school reported that the wages earned during the *NS Links* experience had a substantial impact on the amount of borrowing required in the subsequent school term while the others said that the impact was minimal.

All are currently employed in Nova Scotia with none working for their former *NS Links* employers.

The job search took between 2 and 4 weeks for two participants and no time at all for the other two.

Participants found the reference provided by their *NS Links* employer as a major benefit.

All students were earning between $20,000 and $30,000.

c) University Arts Group

"F" started off her university studies in biology, but transferred to psychology believing that it would provide her with a greater opportunity to prepare for a career where she would work directly with other people in "helping" situations. The *NS Links* experience, in the Registrar's office of her university, surpassed her expectations; providing valuable work experience, references and contacts. She developed presentation and marketing skills which she has used many times since her placement. "F" said, *"I would not have had my job, had it not been for NS Links."*

"F" used the networking skills developed during the *NS Links* placement along with an excellent reference from her employer, to obtain a position as a recruitment officer in the International Liaison Office of an Atlantic Canada University.

Analysis and Observations

Participants in this group represent 15 very different subject areas. Many talked about the opportunities provided to them by *NS Links* and the benefits they received. They felt that *NS Links* provided them with a "stepping stone" to long term employment and the opportunity to get their "foot in the employers' door." They appreciated the independence provided by employers to complete tasks on their own and having the freedom to practice self-direction.

Students in this grouping indicated that they chose their particular program because they were very interested in their area of study or they started in another discipline but for various reasons they made changes to their program of studies.

Twenty-two participants were interviewed, 2 are still attending university and 20 have graduated. Two graduated in 1996, 17 in 1997 and 3 in 1998. The area of specialization is quite varied with the largest concentration (3) in psychology and (3) in public relations.

The *NS Links* experience for 8 occurred in 1995-96 and for the remaining 14 in 1996-97.

Eleven out of twenty-two (11 of 22) knew someone in the company before they were hired and all felt that their contact was helpful in their hiring. All but 2 of the 22 were interviewed along with others for the job.

Ten out of twenty-two (10 of 22) viewed the training modules favorably, 1 had both positive and negative comments and the remaining 9 felt that these sessions were not beneficial. Networking and meeting people were seen as the major benefits of these sessions. The major concern was the need for the sessions to better reflect the varied experiences of the participants.

The wage subsidy was viewed as very or extremely important by 20 of the 22 participants with only 4 believing the subsidy was essential for the availability of their job.

Eleven out of twenty-two (11 of 22) indicated that their employers had provided them with a performance assessment at the end of their placement, and all indicated that the assessment was discussed with them. Fifteen of 22 of the participants completed a final report for *NS Links*.

Individual expectations of the *NS Links* placement were realized by 20 of 22 participants and all but 2 indicated that it was in their career area, helping to confirm their career direction and clarify goals. Only 6 of 22 reported that the experience impacted on their subsequent post-secondary program. Five out of sixteen (5 of 16) reported that the wages earned during the *NS Links* experience had a substantial or significant impact on the amount of borrowing required in the subsequent school term while the remainder felt that the impact was minimal.

Nine out of twenty-two (9 of 22) were offered a job by their *NS Links* employer and all but 1 accepted the offer, while 3 indicated that they were returning to school.

Eighteen out of twenty-two (18 of 22) are currently employed and all but one are working in Nova Scotia. Eight out of eighteen (8 of 18) are working for their former *NS Links* employer. Most participants found permanent employment quickly.

Along with the obvious benefit of being hired by their *NS Links* employer, participants found the references and networks established as the major benefits.

Graduates of programs within the arts specialties appear to be experiencing more difficulty effecting strong attachments to the labour market than other university graduates. Though they have specialized knowledge in a specific discipline, some are having difficulty in obtaining year long regular employment with long term career opportunities.

This group had the highest "still-in-school" rate with three still in school (one at the undergraduate level and two in post graduate studies). Two students are working on short term contracts, two are self-employed in music performance and one is looking for work.

The 18 currently employed indicated the following salary range:

2	under $20,000
11	$20,001 — $30,000
3	$30,001 — $40,000
0	over $40,000
2	self employed — no salary indicated

d) University Commerce and Administration Group

"B" resides in a small community and hopes to remain there. He has been studying since graduating to complete his CGA. His employer told him about *NS Links* and he felt certain that his experience with sports gave him an edge in the interview. He says that his employer recognized that he is a team player and that this came through in his interview. Additionally, he feels that his employer also recognized his strong interpersonal skills.

"B" expressed his appreciation for the opportunity afforded to him through *NS Links*. He liked the training modules and the opportunity to get to know students studying all over the province and in various disciplines. He especially appreciated the sessions given by employers and knew that it was difficult to get them to participate. He felt highly supported by his *NS Links* coordinator.

Analysis and Observations

Motivated by their desire to work and find employment most of the students in this grouping knew and understood that they would be required to work in various areas and that eventually they would end up with the kind of job that would allow them to satisfy their personal aspirations and lifestyles. They spoke of the need to continue learning and they recognize their employers' commitment to assist them in their professional development and of the need to make continuous upgrading a personal commitment.

Twenty-three (23) participants were interviewed, 3 are still attending university and 20 have graduated. Seven graduated in 1996 and 13 in 1997.

The area of specialization is quite varied with the greatest numbers (7) concentrated in accounting, (4) in marketing and (3) in management information systems. Their *NS Links* experience was split fairly evenly between 1995-96 (13) and 1996-97 (10).

Eight out of twenty-three (8 of 23) knew someone in the company before they were hired and 7 of 8 felt that their contact was helpful in their hiring.

All but 1 of the 23 were interviewed along with others for the job. They felt that they had been chosen because of their skills, knowledge, and prior experience.

Most understood the need for mobility in the workplace and appeared ready to make the adjustments required by the workplace.

Fifteen out of twenty-three (15 of 23) viewed the training modules favorably, 3 had both positive and negative comments and the remaining 5 did not feel that these sessions were beneficial. Entrepreneurship, networking, job search techniques and Internet accessing sessions were perceived as the most beneficial. The major criticism was the lack of relevancy of the content for some of the participants.

The wage subsidy was viewed as very or extremely important by 20 of the 23 participants with 8 of 23 believing the subsidy was essential for the availability of their job.

Seventeen out of twenty-three (17 of 23) of employers provided a performance assessment to participants at the end of their placement and 11 of 17 indicated that the assessment was discussed with them. Eighteen out of twenty-three (18 of 23) of the participants completed a final report for *NS Links*.

Individual expectations of the *NS Links* placement were realized by 21 of 23 participants and all but 1 indicated that it was in their career area, helping to confirm their career direction and clarify goals. Seventeen out of twenty-three (17 of 23) reported that the experience definitely impacted on their subsequent post-secondary program, with some altering their program based on the *NS Links* experience. Ten out of eighteen (10 of 18) returning to school reported that the wages earned during the *NS Links* experience had a substantial or significant impact on the amount of borrowing required in the subsequent school term while 8 felt that the impact was minimal.

Nine out of eighteen (9 of 18) were offered a job by their *NS Links* employer and all but 1 accepted the offer.

Nineteen out of twenty-three (19 of 23) are currently employed, with all but one in Nova Scotia. Eight out of nineteen (8 of 19) are working for their former *NS Links* employer. Along with the obvious benefit of being hired by their *NS Links* employer, participants found the job experience, references and networks as the major benefits.

Most of those who obtained employment elsewhere did it without assistance. Over half of the participants found permanent employment quickly.

The 19 currently employed indicated the following salary range:

1	under $20,000
13	$20,001 — $30,000
3	$30,001 — $40,000
2	over $40,000

e) University Science Group

"D" graduated in May, 1997. Within four weeks she obtained a job as an agronomist in western Canada. She is currently responsible for all aspects of a 40 acre breeder seed operation and supervises a large crew of full and part time employees.

"D" felt very fortunate to get her *NS Links* job; a job which exceeded her expectations. She said that her *NS Links* experience helped her to develop excellent resource skills and, most importantly, confidence in her own abilities. She believes that the *NS Links* experience was one of the biggest contributors to her current job success.

Analysis and Observations

The students in these programs all had quite specific career goals and employment plans long before graduation. They generally enjoyed their time with their *NS Links* employers and most reported being able to put into practice the knowledge and skills acquired in university. Several commented on how much new knowledge they acquired in their jobs.

Twenty-eight (28) participants were interviewed, 3 are still attending university and 25 had graduated. Ten graduated in 1996 and 15 in 1997.

The area of specialization is quite varied with the greatest number (7) concentrated in the computer area.

Their *NS Links* experience was split fairly evenly between 1995-96 (15) and 1996-97 (13).

Eleven out of twenty-four (11 of 24) knew someone in the company before they were hired and 8 of 11 felt that their contact was helpful in their hiring. All but 4 of the 28 were interviewed along with others for the job.

Eighteen out of twenty-eight (18 of 28) viewed the training modules favourably. The entrepreneurship session was perceived as the most beneficial. The major criticism was the lack of relevancy of the content for many of the participants.

The wage subsidy was viewed as very or extremely important by 26 of 28 with half believing the subsidy was essential for the availability of their job.

Sixteen out of twenty-eight (16 of 28) of employers provided a performance assessment to participants at the end of their placement and 10 of 16 indicated that the assessment was discussed with them. Seventeen out of twenty-eight (17 of 28) of the participants completed a final report for *NS Links*.

Individual expectations of the *NS Links* placement were realized by 26 of 28 participants and all indicated that it was in their career area, helping to confirm their career direction. Most reported that the experience definitely impacted on their

subsequent post-secondary program. Fourteen out of twenty-three (14 of 23) returning to school reported that the wages earned during the *NS Links* experience had a significant impact on the amount of borrowing required in the subsequent school term.

Eighteen out of twenty-three (18 of 23) of those not returning to their studies said that they were offered a job by their *NS Links* employer and 9 of 18 accepted the offer.

Twenty out of twenty-eight (20 of 28) are currently employed with 6 of 20 working for their former *NS Links* employer. Fifteen (15) are working in Nova Scotia, 2 in Alberta, 1 in Ontario and 2 in the United States.

Along with the obvious benefit of being hired by their *NS Links* employer, participants found the job experience, references and networks as the major benefits.

Most of those who obtained employment elsewhere did it without assistance.

The 20 currently employed indicated the following salary range:

1	under $20,000
3	$20,001 — $30,000
12	$30,001 — $40,000
4	over $40,000

f) University Engineering Group

"S" started to enjoy chemistry right from the time he was first introduced to it in high school. It was about this time that he decided he wanted to become an engineer. He saw engineering as "a perfect career; providing the opportunity to work with your hands and your brain."

Like many others, "S" was first introduced to *NS Links* by his eventual *NS Links* employer, when he was interviewed for his job. "I enjoyed every minute of my placement. I had a great employer-a guy with similar background and interests to me. It was perfect."

Analysis and Observations

The students in this group felt that *NS Links* gave them "real experience, the opportunity to do things for others-important things-things that matter."

A number of these students chose engineering for career opportunities and they are most determined to follow their dreams.

Seventeen (17) participants were interviewed, all were graduates with 1 graduating in 1996, 13 in 1997 and 3 in 1998. Electrical and mechanical engineering were the most common (8 of 17). Eleven (11) had their *NS Links* experience in 1995/96 and 6 in 1996/97.

Sixteen out of seventeen (16 of 17) are working. The 17th returned to university in a Masters Program.

Two out of seventeen (2 of 17) knew someone in the company before they were hired and both felt that their contact was helpful in their hiring. All 17 were interviewed along with others for the job.

Thirteen out of seventeen (13 of 17) viewed the training modules favorably. Entrepreneurship and leadership sessions were perceived as the most beneficial. More choice was requested for the content of the training modules.

The wage subsidy was viewed as very or extremely important by 10 of 17 and a further 4 saw it as moderately important. One third believed that their job would not have been available without a subsidy.

Eleven out of seventeen (11 of 17) employers provided a performance assessment and all but 3 did it in writing. Thirteen out of seventeen (13 of 17) of the participants prepared a written report at the conclusion of their *NS Links* placement.

Individual expectations of the *NS Links* placement were realized in all but one case. This experience for all was in their career area and helped to confirm career direction and in 2 cases provided the basis for a career shift. Most reported that the experience definitely impacted on their subsequent post-secondary program. Eleven out of fifteen (11 of 15) of those returning to school indicated that the wages earned had a substantial or significant impact on the amount of the borrowing required in the subsequent school term.

Only 6 of 17 of those not returning to their studies said that they were offered a job by their *NS Links* employer and 4 of 6 accepted the offer.

Sixteen out of seventeen (16 of 17) are currently employed with 10 working for their former *NS Links* employer. Along with the obvious benefit of being hired by their *NS Links* employer, participants found the job experience, references and networks as the major benefits.

Most of those who obtained employment elsewhere did it without assistance.

Most of the students in this grouping are working outside the province; 3 in New Brunswick (one having followed his *NS Links* employer who relocated), 5 in Ontario, 1 in Alberta, and 1 in Europe. Only 6 chose to remain in Nova Scotia and are earning lower salaries than those who left the province.

Fourteen out of sixteen (14 of 16) of those currently employed indicated the following salary range:

0	under $20,000
3	$20,001 — $30,000
6	$30,001 — $40,000
5	over $40,000

g) College/Private Trade School General Diploma Group

"T" volunteered at his *NS Links* placement knowing that they were applying for a *NS Links* sponsored position. When the employer was approved, he immediately offered "T" the position. The good news story continued and at the end of the placement, he was offered permanent employment as a meteorologist, which he accepted.

"B" was a student in a paralegal program at college. With the assistance of *NS Links*, she obtained a clerical placement with a police department. After graduation, she remained with the police in a clerical capacity, learned more about police work, developed contacts and will enter the Atlantic Police College in September. She knows that after graduation she will return to her employer as a police officer.

Analysis and Observations

Participants in this area came from a wide variety of college programs. They spoke highly of *NS Links* and how they learned to meet deadlines, work in teams, problem solve, make presentations, and work with clients.

Twenty-nine (29) participants were interviewed and all but 1 have graduated from college. Four (4) graduated in 1996 and 24 in 1997. The area of specialization is varied with the largest number (3) in graphics design and in animal science. The *NS Links* experience for 11 occurred in 1995-96 and for the remaining 18 in 1996-97.

Nine out of twenty-nine (9 of 29) knew someone in the company before they were hired and 6 of 9 felt that their contact was helpful in their hiring. Seventeen of the 29 were interviewed along with others for the job.

Fifteen out of twenty-nine (15 of 29) viewed the training modules favourably, 2 had both positive and negative comments, 4 didn't attend the sessions and the remaining 8 did not feel that these sessions were beneficial. Sessions on entrepreneurship and Internet skills were seen as the most interesting and useful. The major criticism was that the sessions were often not relevant for them.

The wage subsidy was viewed as very or extremely important by 26 of the 29 participants, with 12 believing the subsidy was essential for the availability of their job.

Sixteen out of twenty-nine (16 of 29) of employers provided a performance assessment to participants at the end of their placement and 10 of 16 indicated that the assessment was discussed with them. Eighteen out of twenty-nine (18 of 29) of the participants completed a final report for *NS Links*.

Individual expectations of the *NS Links* placement were realized by 27 of 29 participants and all indicated that it was in their career area, helping to confirm their career direction and leading to permanent employment. Only 6 of 29 reported that the experience impacted on their subsequent post-secondary program. Fourteen out of twenty-four (14 of 24) reported that the wages earned during the NS Links experience had a substantial or significant impact on the amount of borrowing required in the subsequent school term, 4 had no opinion, and the remainder felt that the impact was minimal.

Twenty-three out of twenty-nine (23 of 29) were offered a job by their *NS Links* employer and all but 2 accepted the offer, while 3 indicated that they were returning to school.

Twenty-six out of twenty-nine (26 of 29) are currently employed with 16 of 26 working for their former *NS Links* employer. All but one of those employed are working in Nova Scotia.

Along with the obvious benefit of being hired by their *NS Links* employer, participants found the references and networks established as the major benefits.

Most participants found permanent employment quickly.

The 26 currently employed indicated the following salary range:

7	under $20,000
15	$20,001 — $30,000
4	$30,001 — $40,000

h) College, Private Trade School Business Diploma Group

"E's" *NS Links* experience was his first work opportunity, other than previous part-time jobs. He found his *NS Links* job listed on the bulletin board outside the college placement office. He said that he "sold himself" and used "good networking skills" during his interview.

"E's" placement was in his career area. The job provided valuable work experience in computer programming and confirmed his career direction. After graduation, he accepted a job offer from his *NS Links* employer.

Analysis and Observations

It was fairly common knowledge among business students that if you were able to obtain a *NS Links* placement, you were almost assured of a permanent job with that employer. At the very least, you would have a reference which would help with other employers who, it is believed, favour *NS Links* graduates.

Eight participants were interviewed and all but 2 have graduated. Two graduated in 1996 and 4 in 1997.

Three concentrated their studies in the accounting area, 2 in marketing, 2 in tourism, and 1 in general business.

The *NS Links* experience for 2 occurred in 1995-96 and for the remaining 6 in 1996-97.

Two out of eight (2 of 8) knew someone in the company before they were hired and 1 felt that the contact was helpful in her hiring. Six of the 8 were interviewed along with others for the job.

Four out of eight (4 of 8) viewed the training modules favorably, 1 had both positive and negative comments, 1 didn't attend the sessions and the remaining 2 did not feel that these sessions were beneficial. Entrepreneurship and Internet skills were seen as the best of the sessions. The major criticism was that some sessions were poorly delivered by the leader.

The wage subsidy was viewed as very or extremely important by all participants with only 1 believing the subsidy was essential for the availability of his job.

Four out of eight (4 of 8) of employers provided a performance assessment to participants at the end of their placement and 3 of 4 indicated that the assessment was discussed with them. Six out of eight (6 of 8) of the participants completed a final report for *NS Links*.

Individual expectations of the *NS Links* placement were realized by 6 of 8 participants and all indicated that it was in their career area, helping to confirm their career direction and for 1 resulting in a changed post-secondary program. Only 2 of 8 reported that the experience impacted on their subsequent post-secondary program.

One out of four (1 of 4) reported that the wages earned during the *NS Links* experience had a substantial or significant impact on the amount of borrowing required in the subsequent school term, 1 had no opinion, and the remaining 2 felt that the impact was minimal.

Five out of eight (5 of 8) were offered a job by their *NS Links* employer and 4 accepted the offer, while the fifth indicated that he was returning to school.

Seven out of eight (7 of 8) are currently employed with 3 of 7 working for their former *NS Links* employer. All but one are working in Nova Scotia. Along with being hired by their *NS Links* employer, participants found the references provided as the major benefits.

Most participants found permanent employment quickly.

The 7 currently employed indicated the following salary range:

3	under $20,000
3	$20,000 — $30,000
1	$30,001 — $40,000

i) College Information Systems Diploma Group

"F's" father has had a serious disability for many years and as she grew up and experienced the challenges faced by her family to obtain specialist service from a small community she explored other ways for her father to receive the medical help he needed closer to home. She studied biology at the undergraduate level and decided that she needed computer training to get the kind of work she wanted. She enrolled in a one year specialized computer training program and got a summer job funded through the *NS Links* program. Her employer was just starting his business and could only hire her if he were subsidized.

"Paying my salary was difficult for him but by the end of the summer we had new contracts and the business was growing. By then, the company knew me and I knew them. They appreciated my work ethic, my commitment, and my determination to help them make a success of this enterprise. We have now grown to 16 employees and we are very successful.

This is an emerging sector for Nova Scotia and NS Links has played a role. As for me, I earn a good salary, am working at a cutting edge job, and I love it."

Analysis and Observations

Students in this grouping were enrolled in a diploma program in information technology and most chose this area of study for the anticipated job opportunities.

Fifteen (15) participants were interviewed and all but 1 have graduated. Seven (7) graduated in 1996, 7 in 1997 and 1 is still in college.

Five (5) concentrated their studies in computer programming and the remainder specialized in a variety of different areas.

The *NS Links* experience for 10 occurred in 1995-96 and for the remaining 5 in 1996-97.

Three out of fifteen (3 of 15) knew someone in the company before they were hired and all 3 felt that the contact was helpful in their hiring.

Eleven out of fifteen (11 of 15) were interviewed along with others for the job.

Twelve out of fifteen (12 of 15) viewed the training modules favorably, and the remaining 3 did not feel that these sessions were beneficial. Résumé writing and learning what employers want from employees were seen as the major benefits of these sessions. The concerns related to the delivery style of some session leaders and a lack of relevance of the content.

The wage subsidy was viewed as very or extremely important by 14 of 15 participants with 3 believing the subsidy was essential for the availability of their jobs.

Thirteen out of fifteen (13 of 15) of employers provided a performance assessment to participants at the end of their placement and 12 of 13 indicated that the assessment was discussed with them. Ten out of fifteen (10 of 15) of the participants completed a final report for *NS Links*.

Individual expectations of the *NS Links* placement were realized by all participants and they further indicated that it was in their career area, helping to confirm their career direction. Ten out of fifteen (10 of 15) reported that the experience impacted on their subsequent post-secondary program.

Eight out of twelve (8 of 12) reported that the wages earned during the *NS Links* experience had a substantial or significant impact on the amount of borrowing required in the subsequent school term, 1 had no opinion, and the remainder felt that the impact was minimal.

Eleven out of fifteen (11 of 15) were offered a job by their *NS Links* employer: 8 accepted the offer and 3 declined (2 were returning to school and 1 accepted another employment offer).

Twelve out of fifteen (12 of 15) are currently employed with 7 of 12 working for their former *NS Links* employer. Along with being hired by their *NS Links* employer, participants found the references provided as the major benefits.

Many indicated that the company expected them to continue learning and that in-house training would be part of their job responsibilities.

Nine of the students in this particular group of respondents were employed in Nova Scotia with one each in Prince Edward Island, Alberta and Ontario. Eight of the respondents were offered jobs by their *NS Links* employer and accepted.

The 12 currently employed indicated the following salary range:

2	under $20,000
5	$20,001 — $30,000
3	$30,001 — $40,000
2	over $40,000

All felt that their work term, funded through *NS Links*, was most beneficial and they spoke highly of the experience and the positive impact this program has had on their work life.

6. Recommendations

1. Wage Subsidy

It is recommended that the wage subsidy be re-established at 50%, and that the impact of changing the subsidy level on small employer participation in the program in 1998-99 be monitored.

Further to the recommendation that the wage subsidy level be re-established at 50%, a review of the impact of changing the subsidy level to the current 40% on small business participation in the program, should be monitored.

Employer participation in *NS Links* is founded on the availability of the subsidy. Most employers indicated that in order to participate in *NS Links*, the wage subsidy was most important and that a 50 % subsidy was considered essential.

Possible alternatives to wage subsidy were not nearly as well received as the subsidy. Some employers indicated that a tax incentive could be considered as an alternative to the subsidy, however it was not supported by many employers and by very few small employers.

Employers felt that the subsidy is balanced by their contribution to the extensive learning and training opportunities that are offered to *NS Links* participants and they are contributing significantly to the development of a learning culture within the employment community. This fact was strongly supported by the former *NS Links* students. They often expressed their appreciation to their *NS Links* employers for contributing so generously of their time and resources to their workplace learning and eventual success in the workplace in their chosen career area. Students and employers both commented that the high commitment to training would be very difficult to maintain without the subsidy.

The literature and program outcomes in other jurisdictions support the overall use of a wage subsidy as an effective means of targeting employment and training opportunities for specific populations in the labour market. There is evidence that post-secondary students are challenged in obtaining permanent, full-time employment upon graduation. Recent Statistics Canada data (March 1998) illustrate that employment for graduates is the norm-80% of college and university graduates found work two years after graduation. But, many more than in the past had only part-time jobs.

2. Communication

a) It is recommended that communications needs as they impact on staff, employers and other stakeholders be further addressed.

Staff

Information about the program and changes within it are not well communicated and sometimes problematic. Staff reported that at times hey feel isolated about the communication processes at the department.

Employers

Employers appear to have much savvy when it comes to locating subsidy programs. Many of the program participants indicated that they learned about the program from the employers. Employers indicated that the program changes, such as request for payment forms, termination documentation and deadlines were made for the benefit of the department which is probably not the intention of the department. This perspective might be addressed by using a different communication approach.

Students

The level of awareness amongst surveyed students that they were *NS Links* students, and of the objectives of the program; appears to be very low and leads to the conclusion that the penetration level is low.

b) It is recommended that student self-marketing be expanded and facilitated through creating and distributing marketing materials designed for this purpose.

Student self-marketing is amongst the most effective promotional methods, and is preferred by many employers. It also expands program capacity by attracting employers who otherwise may have been unaware of or unwilling to participate in *NS Links*. Further, student self-marketing is a promotion of self-sufficiency that deserves recognition and support.

c) It is recommended that NS Links results be more widely publicized.

Contrary to the recently released study by Statistics Canada and Human Resources Development Canada of 1995 labour data High School May Not be Enough, *NS Links* students claimed to have found employment because of the training they had and because of their work experience and not through relatives and friends. Awareness around these issues serves as motivators for students who may not have personal professional connections which was the case for most of the surveyed *NS Links* students.

It is suggested that *NS Links* produce short video clips of participants to help promote and expand the program. Students could tell of their work and of the work opportunities in certain areas.

Employment survey results after six, twelve and twenty-four months following completion of studies should be collected and then publicized. Information such as this will cause students, parents and post-secondary institutions to reassess the job preparation offered their students. Former *NS Links* students cited labour market demands as a strong motivator for choosing certain areas of studies. Students from certain programs have little work opportunity and are assuming large financial obligations. Respecting their right to choose, awareness and knowledge may serve to cause them to reconsider their choices. Students indicated on many occasions that they had little knowledge and very few opportunities to really learn what jobs pay and what people really do in these jobs. Again this points to the need to enhance career education programs at all levels of the spectrum.

3. Eligibility Criteria

It is recommended that program eligibility criteria guidelines be amended.

Extending eligibility time for students in need who require a longer period of time to secure employment is needed by a limited number of graduates. Some students indicated that they believed they would have benefited from a longer work term and that this work experience would make them more employable. Extending the program to provide an additional wage subsidy for a prescribed period to employers who retain graduating students, is worthy of consideration as a way to improve post-placement hiring.

Resources are needed in the form of mobility assistance for students who must travel significant distance to a placement. Students from remote areas or working in them, and others whose placement needs and opportunities lead them from home, would benefit from access to travel, accommodation and living costs assistance.

4. Cooperative Education

It is recommended that the Department of Education and Culture continue with its efforts to harmonize cooperative education programs with NS Links to the highest degree possible.

In order to reduce confusion and competition, these two programs need to be integrated, inclusive, and invisible as separate entities to both students and employers. Administrative separation remains feasible if it proves to be the most cost-effective manner of integrating them in the short-term.

Efforts to harmonize these two programs must engage funders at the two senior levels of government to rationalize cost-sharing and program delivery. Consultations within the Department will also be critical to a smooth integration of the two programs, perhaps as the initial step in integrating with other programs over a phase-in period of perhaps two to three years, starting in the 1999-2000 delivery year.

5. Partnerships

It is recommended that NS Links encourage the increased involvement of its various partners.

Most employers see an expanded role for post-secondary educators and institutions, which would enhance the educators' connections to the world of work. There should be greater engagement of the post-secondary educators in the workplace, facilitated by a redesigned *NS Links*. Suggestions include: the systematic involvement of educators in workplace visitations; furthering their involvement in the RWGs possibly through the implementation of an educational "sign off" on all employer applications; engaging their participation in the participant monitoring processes; and having the educators engage in workplace dialogues with employers, employer associations, curricula committees and students.

It is suggested that better use be made of private sector institutional partnerships, e.g., cooperative research projects focused on business issues.

The governing bodies, advisory boards, and senior committees of educational institutions should be encouraged to help address the challenge of workplace transitions, within the context of *NS Links* and the Training Culture Communications Strategy.

Employers must have a larger role in the program, other than merely as training and employment hosts. Expanding communication directly and through employer associations, Chambers of Commerce and Boards of Trade, is an effective best practice.

Employers recognize the importance and impact of lifelong learning. Most are willing to participate in training events, in addition to their own training role and some exemplify having the kinds of relationships with post-secondary schools that are crucial to developing an appropriate response to the changing world of work. These role models need to be identified, celebrated, facilitated and replicated to the greatest extent possible.

6. Building Economic Capacity

It is recommended that the Department of Education and Culture devote resources to address, with the universities and colleges, the student capacity problem in engineering and technology.

It is becoming evident that one problem some emerging industries are facing is the small number of students available in certain areas of studies. It's not only a problem for Nova Scotia youth, but is one that will impact on economic growth in many regions. Additionally, these jobs are in the emerging growth sectors and the province may be in a unique situation, as Nova Scotia students have a definite preference to work in Nova Scotia, and if possible in their home community. Such a model is being developed by the Canadian Advanced Technology Association, an organization representing 450 high tech companies in Canada. Further exploration of this issue would possibly be of great benefit to Nova Scotia.

A number of the students commented that the recruiting companies that are on campus early and offer job confirmation early are attractive. "You get your job and you focus on finishing your degree". Given that a number of employers spoke of the shortage of potential engineering employees it might be appropriate for Nova Scotia companies to be encouraged to recruit early in the academic year.

7. NS Links Training Module

It is recommended that the 3-day NS Links training module be reviewed and that a needs analysis be undertaken.

The training modules are one of the more perplexing issues for those involved with *NS Links*. Most people interviewed appeared to be committed to lifelong learning and yet could see little relevance between the training modules and lifelong learning. Caution was expressed that the program should not be overly focused on training, as *NS Links* is an employment program for students in full-time attendance in post-secondary institutions where students are exposed to many of the same topics covered in some of the workshops. Employers see the application of the training modules as presently constituted and delivered, as another way in which their regular employees are disadvantaged in relation to student employees. Employers recognize the need for training and small businesses appear to feel that they cannot always afford to cover all the costs associated with the training. Further, employees must sometimes contribute their own time while employers cover the costs of the training, e.g., tuition. Fairness and loyalty are big issues for employees, and they are both real and perceived.

Given some of the issues raised by employers, program administrators might consider different scheduling alternatives such as evenings, weekends or possibly prior to or following the period of employment.

There does appear to be a dichotomy between the employers and students perception of the worth of the training modules. The majority of *NS Links* students viewed the training modules as beneficial especially the leadership and entrepreneurship sessions offered. A needs analysis involving all parties might address some of the respondents questions and allow for an increased level of satisfaction on the part of all involved.

8. NS Links as a Continuum Of Services

It is recommended that NS Links be more closely integrated with available career services.

Students' career needs in the key areas of work experience and skill development, are met in large measure by the *NS Links* program. However, better student awareness of, and access to a continuum of career services is needed. *NS Links* should be operated as part of a well understood and promoted continuum of career and educational related services, such as provided through existing federal, provincial and organizational infrastructures.

The *service loop* appears to remain incomplete for many participants, such as for liberal arts students who often have difficulty defining and arranging career-related internships and thereby benefiting from the program. The career service infrastructures through the Department of Education and Culture and HRDC are appropriate to help establish the processes for providing a continuum of services for *NS Links* participants and other eligible or about-to-be-eligible populations.

9. Employer Database

It is recommended that a database of employers be created to manage, promote, celebrate and facilitate placements and employer participation.

The restructuring of *NS Links* should continue to be electronically engineered to improve employer access to all student-based subsidy and work experience components and give students access to an approved employer list.

Employers

A database of employers is required to track participation, expand capacity for training and employment opportunities, and to promote and celebrate employers' participation.

Students

A clearing house approach, using existing career facilities e.g., Career Centres, HRCCs, should be undertaken to smooth access of employers and interns to one another. Smaller employers may require additional recruitment assistance. The National Graduate Registry may serve this purpose when it is fully operational.

10. Redesign of the Committee Structures

It is recommended that the RWGs and Provincial Steering Committee structures be reviewed to optimize stakeholder roles and maximize program effectiveness.

The Provincial Steering Committee has done the job for which it was intended and could now be disbanded or continue with a new or revised role.

The RWGs are an important and capable vehicle for ensuring coherent and effective decision-making, program redesign and delivery. Their make-up should be reviewed to increase employer representation and expand their role in marketing, promotion and evaluation.

RWG members should be offered training prior to assuming their responsibilities and given support material explaining their responsibilities and mandate and to assist them in carrying out their responsibilities.

11. Decentralization and Strengthening of Employer Selection and Recognition

It is recommended that the initial employer selection processes be reviewed and formalized by all RWGs. Applications should continue to be approved regionally to ensure program integrity. Approval letters should be sent provincially, with the regional contact as the signator. Local ownership and responsibility for the program should be strongly encouraged.

The contributions of the RWGs in employer approval has been critical to the program's success and the sense of local ownership. Each group, under the direction of the Department and HRDC, should review its decision-making process for employer approvals; to ensure that the funding organizations are properly represented and that the selection decisions are subject to objective and defensible criteria, free of both the appearance and fact of conflict-of-interest. Time should be sufficient for individual RWG members to independently review each employer application. The RWG's role in selecting employers should be strengthened as necessary, to facilitate an efficient and effective use of community resources in program management and expand ownership of the program to its most prominent stakeholders.

Employers must assume a larger role in the program, other than merely as training and employment hosts. Creation of mechanisms to close the loop among the four major stakeholders, i.e., funders, students, employers and educators/institutions, will provide invaluable information for program re-design, curriculum adjustment, e.g., type of hardware or software used educationally and in the workplace, skill components needed, setting program standards, and in evaluating outcomes.

12. Not-for-Profit Organizations

It is recommended that career placements with not-for-profit organizations be reassessed.

Very few students, with their *NS Links* placement in such organizations, appear to have made a successful transition into full time employment. Students graduating in this area either move on to the "for profit" sector or have tenuous employment in the not-for-profit sector.

13. Post-Secondary Career Counselling

It is recommended that post-secondary career counselling programs be improved and that continuous job support be available for the first two years after post-secondary enrollment.

Given that workers who make usage of employment insurance more than once within the first two years of their working lives tend to make much greater and more frequent demand on the social support system, an investment such as this, at this point in their working career might prove worthy of research. Possibilities of developing a role for NS Links alumni warrants exploring, given the high level of support for the program expressed by former NS Links participants.

14. Special Transition Programs

It is recommended that consideration be given to promoting and strengthening transition programs for specific populations.

Research indicates that some individuals in all fields, but especially General Arts, are experiencing difficulty in the transition to secure employment.